

*The Grub Street Nights
Entertainments
by J. C. Squire*



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The Grub Street Nights
Entertainments

J. C. SQUIRE

By J. C. SQUIRE

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THE GRUB STREET NIGHTS ENTERTAINMENTS

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Edited, with an Introduction

SELECTIONS FROM MODERN POETS

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The Grub Street Nights Entertainments

by
J. C. Squire



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THE GRUB STREET NIGHTS ENTERTAINMENTS

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Mr 38 HOOVER

TO
LADY EILEEN ORDE
WHO FIRED THE PISTOL AT THE START

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NOTE

Some of these stories appeared in *The London Mercury*, whose editor has no option; others in *The Century*, *The Windsor*, and *The Illustrated Review*, whose editors are thanked.

J. C. S.

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THE GRUB STREET NIGHTS
ENTERTAINMENTS

THE GRUB STREET NIGHTS ENTER- TAINMENTS

I: THE MAN WHO KEPT A DIARY

I

MR. WILLIAM WIGGLESWORTH was a bachelor. He had greying hair, a bald spot, a small moustache, chambers in Gray's Inn, and a respectable, but not a bloated, income. His only near relative was his niece Mary, who was engaged in social work. Now it was nursing, now it was education, now it was the promotion of international harmony: she had poorly paid jobs in connection with all these successively, and she more than earned her pay, for her ability was considerable and her disinterested idealism even more notable still. They often talked of Society and the duties of its members. "Well, Uncle," Mary would say, "no doubt you are very kind in your own circle. You help your char-

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woman's family, you have helped me, I have sometimes persuaded you to subscribe, and you give handsome Christmas boxes to the porter at the gate. But you really do not justify your existence."

"My existence?" Mr. Wigglesworth would murmur in reply. "Can I really be of importance to any one? I am a very humble person really. I merely want to go on my quiet way. I am unfitted at this stage to earn my living. I know nothing whatever about politics; besides which nobody in politics would ever take me seriously. I make what you would consider a good use of the margin of my small income; my pleasures, which consist of reading a little and observing the world a little, are surely harmless. I beg you do not attempt to convert me into something other than I am."

"Oh, Uncle, you are hopeless," Mary would reply; and, with a sigh, she would resign herself to enjoying the admirable luncheon that he had provided for her. The sherry and the claret she often forgot to commend; but, idealist though she was, she never attempted to conceal her liking for the lobster, of which she always secured the major share. After luncheon, with her coffee-cup in her hand, she would walk round the room looking a little enviously at his

books, which were numerous and well bound. She knew so little about them and she wished she had time to know more. Yet at the end, in spite of all their mutual affection, she always went away wondering whether this selfish bachelor existence ought to be tolerated. Was not such epicureanism the canker which destroyed empires? Was not Mr. Wigglesworth, however modest and conventionally virtuous, one of those drones in the hive whose parasitical presence makes the workers so justly angry? She would sometimes discuss him with her more intimate friends. "I know," she would say, "that it's hopeless to expect him to go into the House. But if only he would serve on committees, or become honorary secretary of the Lifeboats or the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families, it would be better than nothing." "But how on earth, my dear," the friend would reply, "does he spend his time?" "Oh," she would reply, "fritters it away somehow. He goes to his Club, and he goes to private views, and he sometimes goes out to tea, and he sometimes gets asked to a City dinner. I believe he knows all the booksellers and picture dealers, and old friends ask him away for week-ends. And sometimes he gives men's dinners in his chambers. Most of the men he asks are lawyers. In the morning he reads *The*

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Times and sticks in bookplates and throws out crumbs for the pigeons."

"What a life!"

"Yes, what a life!"

II

For the ninety-ninth time Mary had been tackling her uncle about his lack of occupation. He had, she thought, been more than usually annoying about it to-day. On previous occasions he had at least had the grace to be embarrassed by her reproaches and to try perpetually to change the subject. How well she knew those artless stratagems, the questions about her work, the comments on the morning's news, the solicitudes about her health, the remarks about letters which he had received from distant cousins in Australia, the sudden decisions, even, that there was something wrong with the wine and that a fresh bottle must be obtained. "No, my dear Mary, let me get you another glass; I simply cannot allow you to drink that." To-day there had been an odd difference in the atmosphere, no evasions, no shamefaced excuses. Almost always in the past, though his appalling inner stubbornness and inertia had beaten her on the major issue, she had at least reduced his arguments to pulp. He had hardly even attempted to argue, only to

beg immunity from too severe a condemnation. To-day he had assumed another and a very exasperating attitude; it was for all the world as though he had just parted from some bold, conscienceless, even misogynist, ally in the background, who had braced him to fight for his evil cause. To-day there had been none of those rather pathetic silences under rebuke, when care settled on Mr. Wigglesworth's forehead and his heavily-lidded eyes looked sadly out of the window in search of the relief which he knew would not be forthcoming. There was a new confidence in his bearing, something almost of boisterousness. Her most direct assaults were met not merely with equanimity but with jocularly. His eyes looked straight at her and they positively glittered with amusement. When she attacked he almost seemed inclined to counter-attack; he even chaffed her. No captain of industry or attorney could have worn a more assumed air, no successful sailor could have been more buoyant. "Was he drunk?" she asked herself for one awkward moment; but no, he was not drunk. Yet he could not have been more unlike himself had he been at the crisis of a desperate bout.

"Occupation," he said, "there are all sorts of occupations. I don't wish to criticise your mode of life, but I must ask you to

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suspend judgment about mine. I fully agree that my pursuits are not obviously utilitarian, but you really must take it from me that there may be more in them than meets the eye."

"It's all very well, Uncle William," she replied, "but I'm not going on my own opinion, though I should have thought that the way in which you waste your time was perfectly obvious, and I confess that until now I always thought you admitted it yourself. It isn't only me; everybody I know who knows you thinks it too dreadful that you haven't got any aim in life except just amusing yourself. I know you're not selfish at the bottom, but it does look like it, doesn't it?"

Mr. Wigglesworth bit his lip and hesitated a little, while Mary recollected, in a flash, all the occasions on which she had tried to whitewash her uncle. "I know he's rather weak, but he's most awfully kind, really. He's too modest; he doesn't think himself capable of really useful work; and it's so difficult to change old habits, isn't it, especially for a bachelor living by himself."

Had she been mistaken? had the mask of diffidence and frailty at last fallen from a nature which, in truth, had always been hard and wilful? She rose, unhappily, as

soon as the meal was over. "I'm very sorry, Uncle William," she said in a slightly strained voice, with her gaze averted, "I've got an appointment and I shan't be able to wait for coffee."

"Look here, Mary," he said, with sudden decision, taking the door handle from her and waving her to the comfortable window seat, "you simply must stay for a few minutes."

Still a shade sulky she half attempted to renew her protestations, but he would have none of them, and her chagrin was displaced by curiosity when he added, with a very earnest air, "I've found it very difficult to tell you, but I can't bear that you should misunderstand any longer. I am not so idle as you think." She was baffled and bewildered: images crowded on her confusedly: secret service, a midnight concentration on the ologies. He was smiling blandly at her. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I am keeping a diary."

"What," she exclaimed, as though he had said he was keeping a spaniel, "I can't see that there's anything remarkable about that. I keep one myself."

"Yes, Mary," he went on, "but mine may be a little different." Mr. Wigglesworth was always an exact man with a dislike for overstatement, so he left it at that.

"Oh," said Mary, rather mystified.

"Yes," added her uncle with a slightly conspiratorial air, "but I'd rather, if you don't mind, that you kept it a secret."

When she reached the Bureau of Psycho-Technical Research she at once went to the room of her friend Agatha Bonner and told her all about it. A passion for social reconstruction does not always imply a general education, but Agatha Bonner was unusually well read. She took in the situation at once. "I don't know your Uncle, Mary," she observed, "but I take it he is hardly likely to be a Marie Bashkirtseff. You are probably the niece of a modern classic. It's rather thrilling, Mary; it may be a great historical document."

"Well I never," said Mary, "the old fox." But the cordiality of their relations was subsequently uninterrupted.

III

It is one thing to talk about a man behind his back and another to talk to him to his face. Many months elapsed before anybody directly mentioned his clandestine activities to Mr. Wigglesworth, and then it was a total stranger, a large lady with a treble chin whom he had taken down to dinner in a young Jewish politician's house in Bays-

water. During the soup she looked at him coyly, and in a winning whisper said to him: "Oh, dear Mr. Wigglesworth, I would give anything for a glance at your famous Diary."

Our friend smiled, urbanely yet modestly, and observed: "Honestly, I don't think you'd find it very interesting. People exaggerate so absurdly"; and then hastened to turn the conversation to Mr. Epstein's latest exhibition. The lady was pertinacious, and several times during the meal showed an inclination to return to the theme, but Mr. Wigglesworth successfully fenced her off without direct rudeness, and even managed to avoid conceding her an invitation to see his charming collection of pictures in his delightful chambers about which she had heard so much. This encounter, had it been reached without preliminary warnings, might have startled Mr. Wigglesworth. In the old days indeed it would have been a matter of great surprise to him had any stranger at all disclosed, not merely interest in, but bare knowledge of his previous existence. He had walked quietly on the outskirts of the pulsing world and had grown accustomed to pass unnoticed. But during these last months the community had shown increasing symptoms of a new attitude towards him. Several college friends, who

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for years had forgotten him in the pursuit of their promising careers, had sent him invitations to stay in the country. He had gone; he had found himself included in carefully chosen and entirely enjoyable parties; more than this, diffident though he was, he had been unable to avoid feeling that he had held his own with the wittiest and the most important. The days had apparently passed when, except his few intimates, nobody asked him anywhere except to fill an odd chair, and when, in a crowd, he had been accustomed to find his partner, after a few perfunctory words to him, addressing herself to her other neighbour. And he confessed frankly to himself that he liked the change; it was agreeable to find people laughing in chorus at his little jokes, to be engaged, as equal with equal, in earnest discussions by people at the centre of affairs, to be consulted as to his wishes, and to be persuaded into joining all the most pleasant excursions. His town life, meanwhile, had suffered a similar gradual transformation. Cards had begun to pour in on him from everybody he had ever met, and from some enterprising hostesses whom he had never met at all. Wherever he was asked, there he went; it was a congenial change to have a status in the world; he was beginning to talk very well, and he was always the cause

of good talk in others. It was especially stimulating to find so many people anxious to discover what his opinions were concerning art, letters and politics; they seemed so often to wish to agree with him. Materially he was also prospering. At the second large political reception to which he had gone a Cabinet Minister edged him aside into a corner and, after putting very strongly his own side in a very complicated dispute then raging behind the scenes, gave him a financial tip on which he told him he could safely put his shirt. This Mr. Wigglesworth did; with the result that he found no difficulty at all in producing the large entrance fees and annual subscriptions of the three excellent clubs which he had recently been persuaded to join. In a thousand and one ways Mr. Wigglesworth had perceived the indications of a growing interest and prestige; as we have seen, therefore, it was no shock to him when point-blank he was informed that his carefully-guarded secret was out. He did not even seem to mind.

IV

Barely two seasons had passed since all London that counts had grown familiar with the notion of Mr. Wigglesworth as chronicler-in-chief to his time before an ever-vigi-

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lant Press became aware of him. The first paragraph which came to Mr. Wigglesworth's eyes was a scanty one, but significant in that nobody else under the rank of a countess was mentioned in it. It appeared in a column signed "Yvonne," and ran:

Amongst the well-known people seen at the Canine Waifs and Strays' Thé-Dansant yesterday were Prince Hippos of Greece, the Grand Duke Justinian, Lord Ramsgate, Lady Clackmannan and her two charming children Bertie and Gertie, and Mr. Herbert Wigglesworth, who watched with interest but did not dance. *On dit*, by the way, that when Mr. Wigglesworth's Diary appears the dovescotes are likely to be fluttered.

Only a few days elapsed, however, before a further and more elaborate reference was made, this time by a male causeur.

Yesterday, at an exclusive club, I listened to a fascinating conversation in which two statesmen of European reputation and a famous admiral took part. The subject was diaries and the possibility of our own eventful time providing posterity with a diarist of the standing

and value of Pepys or Greville. The opinion was unanimous that a record of the kind was likeliest to come from the pen of Mr. Augustus Wigglesworth. Mr. Wigglesworth, who is one of the best known and busiest of men about town, goes everywhere and sees everybody. For years he has kept a full day to day record, and a duchess told me the other day that Mr. Wigglesworth had been the repository of more secrets than even the late Sir George Lewis.

This became the stock form of all subsequent allusions, and they need not detain us further. It was natural that after the matter had been openly referred to in print, Mr. Wigglesworth should on occasion find people bold enough to refer to it in his presence. Yet these were comparatively few. Now and then a brazen lady would beg for a glimpse of the diary. Once, on a wet Sunday morning in the country, his hostess blandly suggested that the company should come upstairs to her room and Mr. Wigglesworth should read them a few innocuous extracts: "*Do*; only quite old ones about people who are all dead." Our hero evaded the request easily, he carried no diary about with him.

"What about the entries you made last

night?" cried one of the sprightlier of the younger ladies; whilst the Solicitor-General, who had that evening engaged Mr. Wigglesworth in an earnest conversation, gave an involuntary stare of consternation.

"There were none," said Mr. Wigglesworth; and, as a concession, bestowed on them a number of reminiscences which were very dull although entirely truthful.

The one place where frequent reference to his habits was made was in the smoking-room of the liveliest and latest of his clubs. There he lived on terms of affectionate esteem with a number of subalterns whose sense of humour was crude. They would banter each other at tea-time; and when one of them had made a remark of more than ordinary obscenity, another would say: "Mind you put that in your diary, Wigglesworth"; at which the whole assembly would burst into a loud guffaw.

"A busy man," they said in the paragraphs. To Mr. Wigglesworth's shame it must be confessed that he was just as idle as he had been in the days of his retirement. He still lived in Grey's Inn; he still rose late; he merely went about more and talked more; nobody ever saw him working. But the world knew his *raison d'être*, and besides that it was impossible that a man who was seen so much could be conceived as anything

but an active man. In truth he had never even joined a committee. In the old days, except for the sporadic and unsupported solicitations of Mary, he never received a request from anybody to do anything; he was too obscure. Nowadays nobody asked him, though he occasionally accepted the office of patron or vice-president, because he was too celebrated. "Who else can we put on?" the conversation would run. "What about Wigglesworth, he's very sensible and everybody knows him." "Oh, you can't ask him; he's sure to have much too much on his hands to settle down to a routine job."

A Trusteeship of the National Portrait Gallery was another matter; that he was pleased to take, especially when he remembered how little notice anybody took of his opinions about art in the old days. This was his one real office.

He kept the diary. It was all he did. During those first few years he learnt a good deal about human nature. In a few instances men with whom he had been intimate in the past seemed to avoid him; they grew constrained in his presence and looked askance. Once one of them broke silence and revealed to Mr. Wigglesworth the disadvantages of his new rôle. He was sitting in his library late at night, drinking a last whisky and reading Saint Simon, when there

came a sharp knock at the door. "Come in," he called, laying down his book, covers upwards; and there appeared, red and embarrassed, yet oddly resolute, the face of Sir Herbert Pantile, the K.C. "Excellent, Pantile," exclaimed Wigglesworth, "it's splendid to see you. I thought you were never going to come near me again. Have a drink?"

"No, thank you," said the lawyer shortly, sitting upright on the edge of a hard chair. "Look here, Wigglesworth, there's something I want to speak to you about."

"Why not?" said Mr. Wigglesworth, "though I don't suppose I shall be able to be of any use."

"Don't you though. Well, I'd better come to the point at once. Do you remember that time in these rooms when I told you about that affair with Sylvia?"

"Why, of course," said Mr. Wigglesworth sympathetically; "and I can't say how sorry I was."

Pantile glared at him. Then he suddenly burst forth. "Look here, to put it bluntly, I know very well you've got every word of it down in your damned diary." His eye caught a large black enamelled deed-box in the corner; he flushed again and almost shouted, "I won't have it. You've got to tear it out. It's monstrous. It's damned

blackguardly. I'll, I'll, I'll take proceedings."

"Listen to me," said Mr. Wigglesworth, really perturbed and distressed. "I swear solemnly that not a word of that has ever passed my lips, nor is there a syllable about it in any diary I may have kept."

"What proof have I got?" asked Pantile, a little mollified but still suspicious; "everybody knows that a diarist would defeat his own objects if he told everybody what he was putting down. I'd like to see that day's entry."

"I can't show you that," said Mr. Wigglesworth. "I don't suppose you were the only person I saw that day, and the confidences of others must be respected as well as yours. On my word of honour as an old friend, your name is not so much as mentioned either on that page of my diary or any other. That's the absolute truth."

The assurance was at last believed; yet something about the mode in which it was conveyed seemed to leave Sir Herbert even more angry than he was before. Before he was red and now he went white. "Good night," he said brusquely, and walked out without shaking hands. Mr. Wigglesworth sighed and realised that however silver the lining there must always be a cloud. Yet how small his clouds usually were in these

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days! Those who avoided him were as nothing in number compared with those who sought him out. Men saved up their jokes for him, and rattled them out breathlessly. Women dressed for him; strikingly and in a describable fashion, as though they wished to be raw material for epigrams; he was in a manner an elevator of social standards; at his approach the sober vegetable garden became the gay parterre; like the sun, he illuminated everything upon which his radiance fell. Great men, whose eyes would have absently glazed if left with him in the days of his obscurity, now sparkled and shone to meet him. Many and various were the confidences he received. He knew, and was one of the very few who knew, why Crete had not made war on Corea, and for the sake of posterity three separate persons had given him a full account of the negotiations which led to the passage of the Imperial Federation Act.

Private scandals rained upon him. Even when, as occasionally happened, a hubbub ceased awkwardly as he entered a room and he felt all too sure that something was being concealed from him, it always reached him in the end. "You remember, Mr. Wigglesworth, that day when you found us all in the drawing-room together. Well, I wonder if you guessed what it was we were

talking about. I'm sure I oughtn't to tell you but I simply must. You'll hardly believe it, it's almost too disgraceful, but Billy says that Betty—" Yes, the diary was seldom mentioned, but it had a thousand contributors. And a thousand candidates. Several times a lady told him that she had been the One Real Love of some illustrious dead man; no fewer than three ladies made this assertion about their relations with the late Lord Strype, a man of unblemished repute. Painters, novelists, sometimes a preternaturally intelligent commercial magnate, sought the diarist's private and particular attention. Two or three people even bequeathed flattering miniatures of themselves to him when they died. Truly the faces that were presented to Mr. Wigglesworth were not always characteristic faces; and he was assured that, screened from the world, there was a better side to many natures deemed hard, ambitious, and grasping.

He was astonished at the industry with which people endeavoured to reinforce the impressions they had first made upon him. With him the wit was always preternaturally witty, the dreamer abnormally dreamy, the sagacious man sagacious indeed. He often marvelled at the aspirations thus innocently revealed to him, and wondered now and then, after a long encounter, whether or not

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he had imposed too great a histrionic stress upon some strenuous aspirant after a reputable immortality, whether or not sometimes his departure might be the signal for a reaction, a collapse, a call for restoratives, a swoon even.

v

Nobody was surprised when Mr. William Wigglesworth became a K.B.E. The marvel was rather that so generally respected and trusted a figure should not have been honoured before. "For public services," the description in the list briefly ran; after all he was patron and vice-president of a great many indispensable organizations, and he had contributed substantially to the National Art Collections Fund. The Prime Minister had insisted; otherwise Mr. Wigglesworth might have declined. He took a childish pleasure when attending vast parties at which orders and decorations were worn by all save him, in being the only man in the room with a plain black coat. Of such parties the diarist was in his later years an invariable feature, much balder now, a little rounder, his moustache gone completely white. He would stand, the complacent but charming centre of an admiring circle; or wander through the rooms exchanging cheery

words with dowagers and diplomatists, artists, men of letters, and, with a due admixture of deference, Princes of the Blood. Sometimes Mary, now Mrs. Wilkins, would be there; "Yes," she would whisper proudly to her companion, "of course he's my uncle." And what, in such brilliant scenes, were the thoughts of Mr. Wigglesworth—or as we must now call him, Sir William—as he moved so successfully through this world where events were being moulded and history, of which he was to be recorder, made? He kept them to himself, as had always been his way; but they ran like this. "There is Barnby beckoning to me. He is shaping for an entry in the diary. He conceives it like this:

At the Queensferrys' crush I saw —— and Barnby. Poor fellow, he has taken on too much and they overwork the willing horse. The Polish business is obviously weighing on his mind, but it is simply his duty to spare himself. We cannot afford to let him have a breakdown. He looked anxious, worried, but the lines he has contracted only make his thoughtful face more handsome.

Little does he realise that I should be much likelier to put it down like this:

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Saw that pompous ass Barnby at the Queensferrys. His stupidity and smugness are bad enough, but that look of spurious concentration is more than I can bear. It was like his infernal cheek to pester me with his veiled abuse of all his colleagues.

And there again on the balcony is Palmer, the poetaster. He has seen me, but of course he pretends not to have. I know what he wants. His pale profile against the soft midnight sky, a strange alien in that worldly scene. Yes, I know all about that. The most disgusting poseur in London, and about the worst poet who ever deluded the world into taking him seriously. Poor little Jones over there in the corner is ten thousand times better; I'll go up and speak to him, though I shall probably frighten him out of his life." Then he would go down the staircase, chatting and nodding to the orders and decorations, get his hat and coat and depart alone in a taxi for Gray's Inn. The porter would unbolt to him and, under the dark sky, he would walk through the quiet old squares, and up the rustling avenue of trees, to his rooms and his secret; a mystery, an Enigma, a Sphinx; the repository of a myriad confessions and the divulger of none.

VI

Diarists and non-diarists, we all travel the same road. The last entry must be made. There is a page filled and the next page must remain empty for ever. One night Sir William left a jolly men's party at Manton's studio, looking as well as ever; next evening the papers recorded that he had been found dead in his chair. *The Times* on the following day had a long and respectful obituary notice. "Sir William," it said, "was a man of great energy and multifarious interests. His services to, etc., etc., will long be remembered. He had a host of friends, and was on terms of close intimacy with half the most eminent men of his day. But it is quite possible, nay likely, that to our remote descendants he may be far better known than to his contemporaries. It has long been matter of common report that throughout his life he was an indefatigable diarist. Few, if any, have been privileged to see his records, but his opportunities for observation were unique. Wigglesworth's diary may well take its place beside Pepys' and Greville's. The comparison is not too extravagant. Sir William's industry and opportunities were fully equal to those of his predecessors, and in point of wit and breadth of culture he surpassed both of

them. We understand that the executors under Sir William's will are the Rt. Hon. Lord Barnby and Mr. Godfrey Palmer, the poet, both friends of long standing."

VII

So it was, and in a codicil of the will Sir William not only gave his executors full discretion as to the publication and expurgation of his diary and the ultimate disposal of the manuscript, but provided that any profits arising therefrom should be divided between the executors named, assuming them to consent to act. The residue of the estate he left to his niece Mary, now the wife of John Wilkins, Esq., of Somerset House. The executors undertook the burden of the trust.

One spring morning, when the sun shone brightly and the rooks cawed cheerfully over the tree-tops in Bacon's Walk, a little company assembled in the old chambers, still tidy and comfortable as their late tenant had left them. Lord Barnby had brought his secretary, Mr. Palmer had come alone; the fourth of the party was the deceased's solicitor who had brought a bunch of keys. There was an air of expectation, even of excitement, about the party; Mr. Palmer fingered books on the shelves almost fever-

ishly, while the solicitor cryptically fumbled with papers in his attaché's case. At last he was ready. "Well, gentlemen," he said heartily, rubbing his hands, "we may now gaze upon the buried treasure." The key went into the lock, and was turned.

They pulled them out. There were four enormous volumes, as large as ledgers. All except one were completely virgin of any writing. On the first page of that one there was a date carefully written, and a note of the phase of the moon: underneath, in large block capitals, this sole and simple entry:

"This is the diary I have kept. I have kept it for years. I think, if published, it should be published as it stands. Should my executors in their wisdom think otherwise, the responsibility is theirs.—W. W."

II: THE BEST SELLER

I

IVYDENE, No. 23 Acacia Road, Highgate, was a brick villa in a double row of such, with square bow windows upstairs and down, and a small turf garden in front. The approach to the front door was divided from that of No. 25 by a single iron rail, over which it was the custom of errand boys to stride. The habits of errand boys, their callings and whistlings, rather distressed Acacia Road, which was nothing if not respectable. Looking at any of the houses, and at number twenty-three in particular, an experienced observer might have supposed himself able to make a very close guess at the occupations, politics, religion, morals and incomes of the inhabitants. Yet even the most sagacious and likely-seeming guesses are sometimes wrong. The other houses may have contained all that the observer would expect. But number twenty-three contained something not found elsewhere in the street. It contained a novelist.

The fact as yet was known to nobody. The census-taker had collected from number

twenty-three particulars of two persons, and two persons only: John Macdonald Bentley, 38, motor engineer and agent, and Edith Bentley, 35, married woman. The little maid did not sleep under the roof. Her pale face and mouse-coloured hair arrived at seven, in time to black the grates and cook breakfast; she departed daily after the tea-things had been washed up and the supper-things laid. There were no children.

Every morning, after John had gone to business, Mrs. Bentley had plenty to do. She helped Daisy do the bedroom, she herself dusted the drawing-room, she gave the orders to the butcher, baker, and greengrocer, and she then went out to do the shopping, of which, mysteriously, there was always some to be done. Almost invariably she was back to a solitary luncheon. Very occasionally she took the tube to Oxford Street and, after a survey of the drapers' latest displays and the purchase of a handkerchief or a piece of ribbon, she stood herself a cinema, with tea on the gorgeous premises to follow. She would have liked her husband to take her sometimes to the films, but she could not get him to go. He would do a music-hall or a musical comedy now and then; he thought little of them, but they were a reasonable man's entertainments. The "pictures" he could not tolerate; he

disliked the youths and maidens who frequented them, and they even moved him sometimes to grumpy mutterings about "silly women." And he particularly disliked those films by which his wife was most attracted. Mrs. Bentley did not care much for the news-pictures, unless they were of royal processions, and she was bored with enlarged representations illustrating the intelligence of plants and the remarkable, if reprehensible, habits of insects. For her—Romance, physical adventure mingled with Love. The mere troubles and triumphs of explorers were not enough for her; close-ups of lions and tigers helped to fill in her background, but gave her no thrill. She must have a hero in love and a heroine in danger; the hero must be bold and square-jawed, the heroine fair, slim, courageous, high-spirited. Obstacles must impede them and be surmounted; revolvers must point at them and be knocked aside. She adored defiant and deathless love, whether it was on the plains of Arizona, where a solitary man on horseback will dash into a ring of ruffians and rescue, with a swoop of the arm, a helpless but still proud-spirited girl, or in the gilded salons of Park Lane, where the millionaire's daughter will walk out of an unrelenting parent's study (after making one last fruitless appeal) hand in hand with the sunburnt

lover whom she believes to be a chauffeur. She was intensely happy if she could see the elementary virtues in action: Courage, Patience, Generosity, Sympathy, Kindness, Family Affection. Her blue eyes sparkled with especial intensity when it was the heroine's turn to do and dare, and a strong response rang in her breast when Virility in Adversity, assisted by writing on the screen, proclaimed with a proud chin the doctrine that "A Man's a Man for a' that." This was her view; though, of course, it was all the nicer when he turned out to be a duke.

Not that in real life Mrs. Bentley had any thoughts for dukes. She was a virtuous woman, and she loved her husband. She wished, sometimes, that he would share her interests more, as she tried to share his—though, when he made remarks of Fords and the price of petrol and his ambitions and the monstrously extravagant proposals of the local Labour party, he certainly never wanted her to say much. "Oh, John," and "Yes, John," had been adequate. She treasured, a little wistfully, the remote days of their wooing, when he would pour out his dreams of business success and seem to derive encouragement from her unqualified faith in him. Even then, perhaps, he had valued her voice rather as an echo of his own; but as he had progressed so he had

become more and more self-dependent. He had had a rise; he had gone into partnership; he had bought his partner out; he had made an impression on persons more exalted in the trade than himself, and on some local dignitaries who might be useful when the time came. Certainly he knew his job, was intelligent, industrious, and determined; and she still felt that he would get through. Yet private life did exist; she wished that they could do more together and that he would not be so curt and domineering.

Still, he conformed in part to her type, and when, simply because she wanted to do something in the idle afternoons and was persecuted by her day dreams, she began writing a story, it was largely on John that she modelled her hero. The novel came to a premature end. Too much influenced by the last three Great Novels she had read (and talked about to her neighbours) she chose for its setting the northern part of Rhodesia. The hero had a red shirt, top boots, a horse, and, in the due course of nature, a great deal of sunburn; he coped with thirst, made fires out of sticks to keep off the chills of night, struck goldfields, and listened to the roaring of lions. The heroine dressed in muslin, and was always ready to ride two on a horse; she was delicate, well posted in the latest novels, yet a good

shot and perfectly prepared to lead, till something better turned up, the life of a lonely settler's wife. There was no difficulty about the heroine at all, and the hero was John a little altered; more trusting, more egalitarian, more inclined to share experiences. The difficulty came with the background. Much was remembered from the other books: veldt, sjamboks, treks, rapid sundowns, cactuses, stoeps, quivering heat, scrub, and ostrich-farms. At the start it seemed easy, but the details ran out; she had never been out of England and it was a handicap. The book ended abruptly, and it was some time before another was begun. It didn't matter; she was only amusing herself. She went on with her ordinary life. John, in spite of the slump, was prospering. She asked for a new desk and got it. John was always splendid about money. He spent virtually nothing on himself. His few evenings at the Conservative Club were frugal and always with an eye to business; she never asked for more than he could give her, and she never had to justify her requests. "What do you want a new desk for—just for a few bills?" he might have asked. She thought, in a frightened moment, that he was going to say it; but he was unperturbed and authorised the expenditure, kissed her and went off up the road, looking neither

to right nor to left. Into a locked bottom drawer went the old sheets of "Riders in the Wilderness"; the top was too tempting and she began again.

Mrs. Bentley's second theme, fortunately, was less exotic. For three years now they had spent their annual fortnight in Porthruddock, a small fishing town between Fowey and the Fal. They had enjoyed themselves. Sailing, after one experience, Mrs. Bentley had been content to forgo. Most of the days she had sat on a stone seat near the pier-head reading a novel from the local general store, while John, in a yachting cap, had gone out fishing with an aged oarsman. The obvious beauty of the place had made a deep impression on Edith Bentley; thought of from Acacia Road it seemed a paradise of fragrance and passion, the summer sky, the idle waters, the boats, the rocks, the blue eyes and bronzed faces of the handsome young men and wrinkled elders. Vaguely harking back to it this morning she suddenly thought of a plot. A mysterious and solitary lady visitor, of surpassing beauty and intelligence, should arrive—a young woman of title, of course unmarried. Across her horizon should pass the figure of young Harry the silent fisherman; and before long, when she is cut off, after a reckless bathe, by the tide, Harry

should descend the precipice and painfully carry her up. From there she started.

II

It took three months. All that time she said nothing to John. She did not know how he would take it, but at any rate she would keep it as a surprise for him. He might, she realised with dread, turn away with a contemptuous, "Oh, have you?" But at moments she dreamed that he might relax into the softer and more sympathetic John she knew to be buried in him, might even, perhaps, consent to share in her delights and, in the evenings, over the fire, let her read her novel to him and tell her how much he admired her. For she had now come to think that it was really good. She had made discoveries as she went, surprising herself by her ingenuity, by the fluent richness of her descriptions, and being delighted by the way in which her characters came to life and presented her with situations of which she had not thought. For the first time she began to think that she might print it, even make money out of it. What was a success, and how much money one made out of a success, she had not the faintest idea. But she began to have visions of substantial accretions, of a better piano, of

a maid sleeping in—there was a bedroom empty, besides the spare room that was scarcely used—and even of a new house with a larger garden. These fantastic visions she kept in check, but they would recur. And then one evening, when the last correction had been made in the tidy manuscript, she told John.

He had come home very pleased with himself. He had sold two cars and bought one very cheap, an unprecedented day's work; and he came in, a very rare thing nowadays, with a large bunch of flowers for the house. All through supper Mrs. Bentley trembled with excitement. "Surely," she kept on thinking, "John must see there is something queer about me. I hope he won't suddenly ask me what. It's difficult enough as it is." Apparently John noticed nothing whatever. He ate his food steadily and with relish; he made brief complacent remarks about business and the weather; he congratulated her on the meal and openly thanked God that Edith was not like some men's wives whom he knew. The compliments were not relished so much as they might have been, for his wife was preoccupied. She fluttered about making him some coffee, an unusual treat, she carried off his boots and produced his slippers, and she then sat girlishly on the

arm of his chair, which appeared to please him.

"I've got a surprise for you, John," she said.

"Fire away, Edie," he replied good-humouredly.

"I've written a novel."

His face went black. "What?" he said.

"I've written a novel."

"Well, you'd be a sight better occupied looking after the house!" It was a brutal remark.

"How can you, John?" she said. "You *know* I look after the house properly. You know I'm a good wife."

He was a little ashamed of himself.

"Well," he went on, "your spare time is your own; but I don't believe in writing women."

She was bitterly disappointed. There was that thick bundle of manuscript, neatly tied up in green ribbon, full of the romance she would have liked him to share. All the ensuing week a resolution gradually crystallised. She must pursue her dream alone if she couldn't do it in company. The time might come when John would be sorry for his mistake; perhaps there were, she reflected with a sigh, inevitable drawbacks about strong men. She had hoped against hope

that he might help her to explore the unknown avenues of publication; it hadn't even occurred to him that she might be thinking of publication, and she could tell from his demeanour that if she disclosed the fact he would merely tell her not to be a fool. Thinking it over, she realised that he might dislike publication even more than the fact of authorship; woman's sphere was the domestic, and he would feel a fool were his wife known to be the author of foolish stories. The result was, that for the first time in her life she resolved on something which she felt to be a deception of him: the secret composition had not been that, but the affectionate preparation of a surprise. She saw in *The Daily Mail* one morning an interview with Mr. Parker Finch, the celebrated literary agent of Bedford Street. Mr. Finch had just made his fiftieth crossing of the Atlantic. He gave the interviewer his latest impressions of that ocean and his experiences of the working of Prohibition; he paid hearty compliments to American hospitality, and he boasted discreetly of the novelists he had discovered and the manuscripts he had placed. He ended by saying that the demand for vigorous fiction was as great as ever, and that new authors capable of handling a powerful love interest would find a market in two continents open

to them. For a day or two more she hesitated; she was unaccustomed to negotiating with the supermen whose names were mentioned in the newspapers; even the local councillors whose fame filled *The Highgate Gazette* inspired her with considerable awe. Yet, she told herself, Lady Isabel, in her story, never quailed; and with that reminder she went out to a telephone call-office and put her request for an interview through, first to a telephone girl, and then to a succession of other voices, of which the last assured her that Mr. Finch was always delighted to consider the work of new novelists, and gave her an appointment for that afternoon. She lunched early and put on her best clothes; at half-past three she was trembling in Mr. Parker Finch's antechamber. She stated her name and business, was surprised to find that the clerks at the ledgers did not bother to look up, and waited for the messenger to return from the great man. He came back: "Will you please come and see Miss Perkins, who is head of our Fiction Department?" Along the corridor she walked, vaguely picturing the omnipotent Miss Perkins; she imagined a fierce-looking dame of middle-age, with pince-nez, a set mouth and a high forehead. She was shown into a small cabin and there she was presented to a young lady with very red lips

and profuse fair hair, aged about twenty-one, but obviously possessing the self-confidence of maturity. The parcel was undone, and "Bread upon the Waters" lay naked upon the desk beside a high pile of similar packages.

"It is a pity you haven't had it typewritten," remarked Miss Perkins, idly turning the pages over. "Still," she added with condescension, "the writing seems reasonably clear. Well, Mrs. Bentley, as you no doubt know, it's almost impossible in these days to get a first novel accepted. But you will hear from us."

Mrs. Bentley was slightly chilled; Mr. Parker Finch, it seemed, was much more optimistic than his colleague; but a timid suggestion that she would like a word with Mr. Finch made no impression whatever. She was ushered out, feeling lost; she was not in the mood for a cinema and went home to a solitary and rather depressed tea.

III

Three months passed, normal months. For the first few days Mrs. Bentley waited feverishly for news; none came. Other novels appeared, some made successes; she could not help nowadays reading these with rather a jealous eye; their characters were no

more splendid, their scenes no more vivid, than her own; and she was especially chagrined when she read one with a Cornish setting, which had a cynical tone that repelled her. As the weeks passed she began to be reconciled; other stories came into her head, but she did not try to begin them; John never referred to the novel and never even appeared to remember it. He was doing well, making money; in the winter, he casually mentioned, they ought to be able to run a Ford themselves which could be garaged at the works. Then, at last, one morning in June, came a letter from Mr. Parker Finch, signed "pp. E.P.," asking for the pleasure of an interview with her; he had, he said, news which he thought would gratify her. All her visions rushed back in a flood; and when she found herself this time brought not into Miss Perkins's little den but into the spacious and shiny office of Mr. Finch himself, her heart beat almost painfully fast and she was barely able to speak. The agent, however, did not appear to notice this. Portly, suave, grey-haired, spectacled, he offered her a cigarette (she had only twice in her life been offered one before and refused in terror), lit one himself, and proceeded to expound his good news. His reader, he said, had been struck by the popular potentialities of the work; he could

say no more than potentialities, for these things were always something of a gamble. The firm had impressed this view upon Messrs. Simpson, the well-known publishers, with the result that they had accepted "Bread upon the Waters" for publication in the autumn. He had hopes that Earwakers would do it in America, where the chances of a profitable sale were even greater than in England. "Here," he said, "is the proposed contract. I believe we have secured you excellent terms." He proceeded to bewilder her with ten per cents., fifteen per cents., twenty per cents., reverting copyrights, Colonial editions, dates, publishing prices, and his own commission.

"Of course," he concluded, "you would prefer to take it away and consider it before signing, but we should like it back as soon as possible or the book may be held up until the spring."

He gave it to her; she handled the typewritten sheets as though they were red-hot; the words swam. "How am I to make head or tail of it all?" she wondered desperately, "and it's no good asking John." She even thought that John might stop the whole thing if she mentioned it to him.

"Oh, please, Mr. Finch," she said, "can't it all be settled now? I'm sure I'd much

better leave all these details to you. You are so much more experienced."

"Certainly, if you really think so, Mrs. Bentley," he replied, "but I thought it best you should not sign without due consideration a contract you might subsequently think not to your advantage. However, if you're really sure . . ."

He witnessed her signature to two sets of folios; he shook hands warmly; he expressed the best wishes for her success; he said, "We must have another one soon, you know," and he showed her out.

John was out that night, at the Club. She was awake when he came to bed and long after he had gone to sleep; but it was scarcely the time for broaching the question again. In the morning she followed him down to breakfast; in her place were two letters from aunts, and a long envelope addressed in blue typescript. She opened the others first with an air of unconcern, then, thinking that John was glancing curiously at her, slit the third with a knife and pulled out the contents. It was her copy of the contract, signed and stamped by the publishers, and covered with a complimentary note from Mr. Finch himself. The moment had come.

"John, you know that story I told you I had written."

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"Umph."

"It's been taken. It's going to be published as a book."

John did not look enthusiastic, but if he was annoyed he had the decency to suppress his sentiments.

"This is the contract, John."

"What contract?"

"The contract with the publishers. Mr. Parker Finch arranged it."

"Who is Mr. Parker Finch?"

"My agent."

"How much have you had to pay him?"

"I haven't paid him anything, John. He only gets a commission on what they pay me. It depends upon the sales."

He could not entirely control himself. "Don't I earn you a good enough living?" he asked, looking away from her with a set face. Then, hearing her catch her breath, he turned around and said more kindly, "For God's sake, Edie, don't get carried away by this nonsense. Nobody's going to buy your book, and if they do you can bet this agent fellow will get all there is to be got out of it. He isn't in it for his health. Let's have a look at this precious contract."

He examined it with as casual an air as he could assume. The terminology was strange to him, but he could find nothing particularly wrong. "There's a catch some-

where, I bet, but I don't see where." Then an access of anger came to him as he realised that the thing was final.

"What right," he said, fiercely, "had you to go and fix up this rotten idiocy without me? I suppose I can have some feelings in the matter. Anyhow, why did you want to be such a damned little fool as to sign the thing without showing it to me? What do you know about money and figures? What does any woman know about business? You've got no more of a business head than that cat."

She broke into tears. "I didn't like to show it to you before, John; you've disliked me writing so; I thought you might have stopped me from trying to get it published at all."

John was a truthful man. "Well, I dare say there's something in that," he said; "come along now, you'd better cheer up. The fat's in the fire now."

IV

For some weeks after "Bread upon the Waters," by Edith Bentley," appeared it showed small signs of success. Mrs. Bentley had yielded to the blandishments of a press-cutting agency, but the first batch of cuttings she got was scarcely exhilarating.

She had had a moment of excitement when her six author's copies had arrived; one had been sent to Aunt Jane, one to Aunt Emily, one to John's mother, and one to a school friend, now married, in Canada; one she had kept for local lending, and one for the drawing-room. John, in a yielding mood after a profitable deal, had gone so far as to say that he "would have a look at it some time"; the relatives had all written letters full of pride and rhapsodies. "I do so love Jacob," Aunt Jane had said, and Aunt Emily had written "Lady Isabel did quite right, Edie. Whatever the world may say, she would have been an unhappy woman if she hadn't. And how splendid Jacob was, giving all the money he had to that poor ex-soldier on the Road." These letters she read and re-read; but she made allowances for the fondness of relatives. Was she wrong? she wondered, as she perused the opinions of the Press. Two or three lines was all she usually got. A paper she had never heard of wrote: "A harmless amateurish romance"; another "A silly tale presumably by a very young woman who has read Miss Bagstock"; and a third, which had apparently confused her with somebody else, referred to her book as being "One more concoction, true to type, by this popular author who, we understand, is universally read by

servant girls." As against these there was some small consolation in the remark of a penny morning paper that her book was as readable as a number of others with which it seemed to have been noticed, and a Scotch paper's warm but all too brief praise of it as "an exciting but thoroughly wholesome romance written with imagination, verve and dramatic power." The next lot were similar, and then, lonelily, came a substantial and glowing note from a journal in the North of Ireland, which surprised her by saying that the book was a magnificent romance and deserved a great success.

The first indication she had that "Bread upon the Waters" had sold to the extent of at least one copy came from Acacia Road itself. Hitherto she had had but a cold bowing acquaintance with Mrs. Harbutt, the doctor's wife at the end of the road, a great aristocrat. One morning, as she was going out with her shopping bag, she was stopped by Mrs. Harbutt, who spoke with a sweetness from which the touch of patronage had almost entirely disappeared. "Oh, Mrs. Bentley, I *was* so astonished when Mrs. Hopkins told me you'd written a novel. You simply must let me tell you that we got it from the library, and my husband and I have both enjoyed it immensely. Do come to tea to-morrow. We have a very old

friend coming. He is very literary, and we have told him about your book. I'm sure you and he would like to talk to each other." To tea she went; the old friend proved to be a self-satisfied elderly gentleman named Donkin, round-bodied, white-moustached, small of eye, who expressed great pleasure at meeting Mrs. Bentley. He discoursed, while the doctor's wife watched admiringly, on the relation between "Bread upon the Waters" and the principal works of Dickens, George Eliot, Hope, Hichens, Hall Caine, and Dell, all of whom he appeared to regard as on a level with each other, though slightly inferior to himself. Each had his merits and his defects; "Bread upon the Waters" was a promising beginning, "a very promising beginning indeed, my dear lady." Mrs. Bentley was puzzled, humbled, but grateful; whenever one of her characters was under discussion she showed an animation unusual with her, explaining or defending her persons with eagerness.

Mrs. Harbutt was kind enough to pass the word along the whole road; several women previously known to Edith Bentley only by sight accosted her and volubly proved their ability to rise to her intellectual stature, comprehend her creations and share her emotions. "I am telling all my friends," each one assured her. Then one morning came a

letter from a stranger, a man living in Streatham. It had been forwarded from the publishers. "Dear Madam," it began:—

"I crave your pardon for intruding on your privacy, but I cannot help writing to tell you that your great book, 'Bread upon the Waters,' has altered my whole outlook upon the scheme of things. I borrowed it first from a lady friend. I have now, though not rich, bought a copy for myself. I have never been so thrilled by a story before; indeed, in the ordinary way I do not read novels. You deserve a great success. May Heaven shower all its blessings on you!

Yours in gratitude,
HENRY CUTTS."

This was a joy. Blushing, she passed it over to John. He read it with an appearance of impassivity and handed it back without comment. Then, as he was moving towards the hall, he said: "By the way, it may interest you to know that one of my customers spoke to me about your novel yesterday. Big man in his way, too. It seems funny." He did not add "I can't imagine what they see in it"—he had perused it himself and told her it was a good enough yarn but a bit off his beat. He was, how-

ever, in spite of himself, contracting a new, rather uncomfortable kind of respect for a woman of whom people spoke so highly. "Queer thing," he thought to himself as he walked down to the tram, "I hope it won't go to her head."

It did not, though she naturally gained in confidence. Mr. Parker Finch wrote in late November to say, "Would you mind calling at once? I have several things to talk over. You may like to know that I heard from Mr. George Simpson himself yesterday, and he says that the sales from your book, slow at first, are now very satisfactory indeed. He would like to meet you." When she went, Mr. Finch first of all impressed on her the need of supplying Messrs. Simpson, who were completely at her service, with another novel by June. He then said, "Now, can you write short stories? At this stage it will pay you."

"Would one about a flying man do?" she inquired.

"Admirably, the very thing," replied Mr. Finch, as though the whole plot were before him in all its details; "let me have it as soon as you can." He added, casually, that while she was waiting for her first royalties a hundred or two was at her service, if she would honour him by accepting it. A picture of hats, dresses, and a resident maid

flashed across her mind; suppose it was now or never? The thought of what John might say deterred her, and she declined with thanks. The next thing that happened was that in the morning paper she saw, and rubbed her eyes to see, a letter from a correspondent raising a point of conduct in connection with "Bread upon the Waters." More astonishing still was an editorial footnote (which mentioned the publishers' name) asking for "opinions from our readers" regarding the characters in this novel "which is everywhere being read and discussed." That same afternoon Mrs. Bentley was sitting at her desk by the bow window, thinking of the self-sacrifice and ultimate happiness of her stern but tender flying man, when she heard an imperative knock at the door. Peeping through the lace curtain she beheld a young man, a complete stranger, a shrewd-looking pale-faced young man, wearing a rakish bowler hat and a smart grey overcoat, who dropped a cigarette-end on the step and trod on it. Daisy answered the door, a loud voice spoke, and in he was shown, holding out a card in front of him: "Mr. Edward Giles, *The Daily Messenger*."

"Excuse my coming without phoning you, Mrs. Bentley. I couldn't find your number. Will you allow me to smoke a cigarette?"

He suited the action to the word, replaced the case, and went on: "The fact is, my people want to know if you would be so good as to allow us to print an interview with you regarding the Present State of the Novel."

Mrs. Bentley was at a loss. "I think it would be much better if you would go to somebody who knows more about it."

"Just what we wanted, Mrs. Bentley," said the bright young man encouragingly. "If I said that you felt that your own success proved that there was still a considerable demand for good books, I should fairly represent you, shouldn't I?"

"Yes," faltered the successful novelist, not knowing what else to say.

"And now about this matter of working hours. Do you work late?"

"Oh, no; my husband always spends the evenings with me."

"The mornings then? The afternoons?"

"Yes."

"In fact, I can tell the *Messenger's* readers that you are one of those who maintain that the faculties are never so bright as during the hours of daylight, and that Lord Byron's example of nocturnal work under the influence of stimulants is not to be commended to creative artists in general."

"Yes, that is—yes," said Mrs. Bentley,

wishing he would go, but not accustomed to the ejection of unwanted callers. Before he had gone he had obtained from her similarly dogmatic views regarding the ideal number of sleeping hours, the place of women in politics, the respective attractions of Cornwall and the Riviera, the merits of the younger poets, the prospects of religion, and the reform of the House of Lords. "Very many thanks, Mrs. Bentley," he concluded, clapping an elastic band over his notebook and stuffing it into his pocket. "No, thank you, I won't stay for tea. I can let myself out. Oh, I beg your pardon, but can you let me have a photograph?" He thought little of that old Highgate photograph of her, but took it and said that they would get Thompson and Waller, of Bond Street, to ask her for a special sitting. "They will like to have one in stock," he remarked as he went, letting himself out. She heard his stick rattling along the railings as he vanished up the road. She was confused.

She was more confused still when, at breakfast next day, she looked at the morning's *Messenger*. There was a whole column of it, with the photograph reduced to the size and complexion of a black postage stamp. Under the headline, in heavy letters, was a description of herself as "Edith

Bentley, who has made an instantaneous success with her striking romance of Cornwall." In the introduction her address was given—"her quiet suburban retreat"—and also, what was worse, her husband's name and profession. She turned pale as John took the sheet and, grinding his toast, glanced over it. Happily, as he had an automatic talent for avoiding the kind of topics which did not interest him, though he would have noticed anything about carburettors or petrol prices if stowed away in the obscurest corner, he stared at the very place without noticing the article; then he put the paper down, gave her his preoccupied morning salute, and walked off. At supper time it was another affair. He stalked in looking very angry indeed; anyhow it was bad enough to have one's wife in the papers, but to have the more flippant and incompetent of one's associates jesting about one's "quiet suburban retreat" was too much. "What did you want to talk all this rot for?" he said as soon as he had come in, slapping accusingly a copy of the paper which he had brought with him. With unusual spirit she answered that she had said scarcely a word of it. "Anyhow," she remarked, "look at this." It was a letter, just arrived, from Mr. Parker Finch, who had written the moment he had

seen the interview. "Congratulations," he wrote, "on the magnificent column in the *Messenger*. I dare say you suspect that Simpson's arranged it, but they tell me it was a spontaneous idea of the *Messenger* people themselves. It's just what we wanted at this moment when the book is trembling on the edge of a *very big success* indeed. By the way, a draft contract for your second novel is ready for your approval. Your royalties payable in March will amount to not less than £500; the next instalment, as the book did not run to big figures for some time after publication, will certainly be much larger. I should be happy if you would accept from me the enclosed cheque for £250 in advance of your account. It is not technically due, but may be of some slight use to you. Yours, with renewed congratulations."

John stared at the letter. Then he stared at the cheque. He was white and trembling. The sum staggered him. Though not an imaginative man he suddenly thought of all the hard drudgery he had had to do himself before he earned as much money as that. It was cruel. It was incredible. Yet it was true. And what couldn't be done with such a sum; and more coming too. But no, it was only Edie. There was something funny

somewhere; anyhow, he was hanged if he was going to be dependent on it or have anything to do with it.

"Look here, Edie," he said, "this is a fluke. Personally I prefer honest business. Quick come, quick go. You put it in the bank and don't you expect too much."

She was chilled. Put it in the bank! Her first earnings that Mr. Finch had specially sent her to spend; and so much coming too. "I won't, John," she said, "there's lots of things we want in the house and I'm going to get them."

"Please yourself," he said, "but it stands to reason this can't last."

"But, John," she protested, "you can see Mr. Finch's letter. And they will give me a big advance on the one I'm doing now, and Mr. Finch says he believes he can get me twelve hundred pounds for six short stories from *The Mauve* and an American magazine."

"I'd like to know more about your Mr. Finch," said John. "I've met these men who talk big money before. But please yourself."

v

He thought it couldn't last. But it did. Interviewers now came almost daily, the letters from admirers in small sackfuls. There

was a slight slackening as the English sales waned, and then they began pouring in from America. It appeared that from New York to San Francisco, the whole population was reading "Bread upon the Waters," and the whole population appeared to be of one mind in its admiration for the book, its desire for further elucidation of certain problems, and its anxiety to obtain Edith Bentley's autograph. The £1,200 for the stories arrived; also £500 advance in the expectation of the MS. of "Out of the Mouth," particulars of which were now beginning to be bruited about in paragraphs. Most of it did go into the bank, but Mrs. Bentley, persuaded by a fellow novelist whom she met at her first grand luncheon with Mr. Finch and Mr. George Simpson, had joined an intellectual club, got on terms with a West End dress-maker, and contracted the habit of an occasional taxi, John's Ford not having yet appeared. Tempting offers for articles and books became frequent; but she trusted Mr. Finch and Mr. Simpson; and had she not reason? England was nothing to America; one way and another, fifteen months after her first appearance in print, she had made £10,000. If the dramatic schemes that Mr. Finch was negotiating were to be successful this might be multiplied several times. More than once during the year she told

John that they would simply have to leave Acacia Road; she had seen a nice empty house, in its own grounds, by the Heath. He remained stubborn. "Put it in War Loan," he said, "and draw the interest." As the year drew on and she had an occasional engagement at night—in the autumn she made her first speech at a dinner—she became accustomed to a hired Daimler; at the end of it her literary friends, who did not know John and regarded him as a vulgar monster, braced her to the decisive act. She took the house. John must move, and that was all there was to it.

The house warming at Heath Crest was a great success. The weather was too cold for a garden party, but the rooms were filled. All Acacia Road was there, Mrs. Harbutt being flattering to a degree; enthusiastic over "Out of the Mouth," enthusiastic over the chairs, the curtains, the conservatory, the parlour-maid's cap, everything. Mr. Donkin came with her, affable, reminiscent; "a better book in some ways than your first, Mrs. Bentley," he said; "very like Dickens in some regards, reminiscent of Dell in others." Lady Smyly came from the club; she had a young man with her in a morning coat and spats, she approved everything in a loud voice to the fair fashion correspondent of an evening paper who, with the instinct

of her kind, had found her way to the "event." Several popular novelists of both sexes attracted general attention. Mr. Finch engaged them all in turn. Mr. George Simpson himself made a transient and gracious appearance, and some of John's business friends with their wives, who had insisted upon coming, prevented John from hiding upstairs as it was his instinct to do. Still convinced that this fortune was all a bubble compared with the solid structure of his motor business, he had gone on with it, refusing, moreover, to touch a penny of the money that his wife offered him. "I've made the business myself," he said, "and I can expand it myself."

He knew his job, but he did not know everything. Six novels appeared in six years; two of them became popular plays, all were vast successes. Long before *Punch* left off mentioning Edith Bentley because it was tired of doing it, long before the first "Uniform Home Edition" was published, before the first American trip, soon after the visits to Spain and Algeria in search of local colour, John's spirit was finally broken. Edie, after all, was prudent enough. With fifty thousand locked away there was no harm in spending any number of thousands she might earn. The Bentleys to-day live in a large villa at Teddington. There are

several acres of garden and a drive. The house, a noble structure well provided with pilasters, turrets, battlements, pointed windows, corbels and half timber, was built in 1870 by a Mincing Lane broker; the cellar is large and the servants' quarters adequate, and the Rolls Royce and the two little cars are housed in a converted stables. John looks after them, it all puzzles him, but he knows now that he married a wife greater than himself, though it beats him to see why, except that the results are there. Sometimes he notices covert insults of her in papers. "Jealousy, I suppose," he says; she herself never seems to bother. At Sunday luncheon, when she is not abroad, Mrs. Bentley is at home to all her friends who care to telephone. Sometimes there are twenty there, all apparently rich, judging by their cars: overdressed ladies of middle age, journalists, respectful publishers, a deferential Mr. Parker Finch, American visitors, Mrs. Bentley's stockbroker, Mrs. Bentley's solicitor, some of the élite of the neighbourhood. Mrs. Bentley sits at the head of the table, full of laughter now, much fatter than she was; double chinned and clad in the extreme of fashion. People are sometimes puzzled by the total absence from her demeanour and conversation of that passion, that ardent spirituality, that preoccupation with fire and

flood which are so invariably characteristic of her fiction. Her talk is of people, foreign hotels, and percentages, publicity, the United States, the shameful immodesty of some of her junior confrères, the iniquities of the Labour Party. This last, long ago, was one of John's topics, but he no longer cares, as he does not himself pay rates. For him, he drinks, on these occasions and all others, rather too much whisky; he suffers from lack of occupation, is glad when somebody's motor goes wrong, and, in the mornings, potters about the garden in slippers. Edith is as fond of him as ever, but she has become accustomed now to treating him as "dear old John," a quiet unobtrusive being whom it is nice to talk to about her affairs when they are alone, who is rather shy when there are a lot of people about. He always agrees with her. Now and again, when there is a party, some visitor who wishes, either because he thinks John a good channel to his wife's pocket, or because he sincerely wishes to encourage and draw out this retiring man whom so many treat as a cipher, says to him: "I suppose, Mr. Bentley, that you do all Mrs. Bentley's business for her. Contracts and so on. These artists, you know?" "No," says John, "Edie does all that herself. She has a good business head, has Edie. I leave all money matters to her."

III: THE SUCCESS

I

“**I**S there no hope that you may go on, Mr. Donaldson?” asked the anxious-looking man who sat in the publisher’s room.

“None at all, I’m afraid, Mr. Hilton,” replied the head of the firm. “I need scarcely say that I shall be profoundly sorry if our personal association is broken, but there must be some limit to the amount we are prepared to spend on the endowment of literature, however good.”

“But,” timidly interposed Ambrose Hilton, “I am convinced that this new one is much better than anything that I have ever written. I can’t help thinking people are bound to like it. Don’t you think I may be just on the verge of a success at last? You’ve always believed in me; can’t you back me just once more?” He was tempted to add, “I shall be in a dreadful hole if you don’t,” but the remnants of his pride restrained him.

Donaldson was a decent old man. He read little himself, but he respected intellect, and he had always maintained that the firm

had a duty to literature up to a point. But he shook his head. "I devoutly hope you *will* have a success, Mr. Hilton, whether with us or elsewhere. It may be that one of our younger and more enterprising rivals might be able to do more for you than we have been able to do." Mr. Donaldson felt more than a touch of compassion as he looked at the delicate man beside him, the pinched intellectual face, the fine forehead, with the skin drawn tight and hollows by the temples, the anxious eyes, the sensitive mouth under the neatly-clipped greying moustache: a man all intelligence, conscientiousness, consideration, decency: a quiet man who lived for his work and had probably never harmed anybody in his life. But, as he might have said, there was a limit to compassion. That way lay ruin. "No," said Mr. Donaldson, "I'm afraid that even if I felt, as I do not, that we should be justified in continuing to pay these advances, my views would be overborne by those of my partners. We shall be happy, Mr. Hilton, to publish your novel on a pure royalty basis, but we cannot, in the present state of the market, pay you an advance which we fear the book is quite unlikely to earn. Let me know when you have thought it over."

Ambrose Hilton rose. "I must apologise for trying to argue with you, Mr. Donaldson.

I appreciate very much the faith that you and your firm showed in me for so long, and I quite see that from your point of view you are forced to take the view you now do. Good-bye and thank you very much."

"Good-bye, Mr. Hilton, and the best of good fortune."

Ambrose Hilton put on his hat, faded out of the room and went down the familiar stairs, where the glass doors bore the familiar names of persons always unknown to him: "Cashier," "Mr. Jellicoe," "Advertising Department." It was a large house; large enough, he thought with a sigh, to maintain a dozen modest authors like himself. The front office was always full of messengers fetching parcels, the street entrance always blocked with mysterious vans: in the show window they lay in rows, the latest great successes, novels of fabulous vogue, fashionable biographies, sumptuous two volume works of travel which he saw mentioned in every paper he opened. What a fly on such a wheel must be a person like himself, he reflected, as he left Southampton Street, crossed the Strand by an island, and, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, went down Savoy Street towards the Embankment. Yet, he had to admit at last, Donaldsons could hardly be expected to behave otherwise. What call had he on them? They

had gambled on him and they had failed. They had surely been kinder than most would have been. He was a failure—lucky perhaps to have found publishers who had been so patient. He walked, musing, along by the Thames parapet, under Waterloo Bridge, and so, past the station, to the Temple Gardens. It was a sharp, but fine, autumn morning; he had his overcoat on. He crossed to the gardens, went in, and sat on a seat under the plane trees, pleasant in the sunshine with their large yellowing leaves and peeling trunks. Twelve o'clock; an hour to lunch and nothing to do. He laid his brown paper parcel on the seat beside him. It contained the fruits of a year's devoted labour. He fell into thought about it and surveyed the whole past which had culminated in this moment of grey hopelessness when the sunshine seemed ironic and the chatter of passers-by callous.

An orphan with just enough money set apart for his education, he had been sent to a small public school and a small college at Oxford. His life there had been, with the exception of one incident, uneventful. He had had a few quiet friends, mostly in other colleges; he had read all the good books in the Union library; he had, while an undergraduate, contributed a few sensible papers and one or two carefully-written stories, to

the superior kind of London review. Under something like compulsion, but with a good grace, he had rowed in the college second boat one year and he had attended a number of debates without speaking. The exceptional incident occurred in his last Eights Week. A friend of his, Arden, had his sister up. Ambrose Hilton did not dance and cut no great figure at parties of any kind; he tended to drop plates and tread on skirts, though his mere manners usually occasioned favourable comment which would have surprised him. But he met Evelyn Arden at several functions, he had tea with her and her mother in Arden's lodgings, and he finally took her on the river in a canoe, a punt being beyond his powers of navigation. Her beauty dazed him, her quickness of mind delighted him, and her responsiveness to all his tastes and opinions, as well as little jokes, was something that never in his life he had experienced before. Once or twice they became serious almost to the point of tenderness, and he was wild enough to fancy she might even see something in him. He checked himself, however, realising that so lovely and gifted a woman could think little of a shrinking, speechless being like himself. This diffidence it was, rather than any mundane considerations about his prospects of maintaining a wife, which would have pre-

vented him from making anything like an avowal without a more specific invitation than he could expect to get. A grosser person might have noticed that Miss Arden took a particular interest in him, might have deduced encouragement from her willingness, for the sake of his company, to forgo a good deal of dancing, of which she was very fond, from her deliberate choice of his conversation rather than that of several undergraduates more celebrated for features, muscle or mind, and especially from her action (almost brazen she probably thought it herself) in opening a correspondence with him a week or so after the festivities had ended. Her first letter—for she *had* to say something—asked for information about books to read. What was the best life of Shelley? Would she find Fielding too dry for her? She also wondered, in a postscript, what plans he had, whether he had begun his novel, the synopsis of which had been so interesting, and whether he was ever likely to be in the west of England. Hilton replied at once, posted the answer after a day's wait, and then feared that she might resent this appearance of precipitate eagerness; it was difficult to strike the mean between an intrusive haste and a too unmannerly delay; he did not want her to think he welcomed her letters more keenly than he had a right to, and yet he

dreaded that she should think him indifferent to the privilege she was bestowing. It did not occur to him that she also was anxious not to appear to force the acquaintance; at all events the upshot of it was that after some months of intermittent and formally friendly correspondence she wrote that she had been offered a chance of a year's holiday in India, and hoped they would meet when she came home. By this time he was settled in London lodgings, with a hundred pounds, which was all he had left, beginning what he hoped would be a career in literary journalism that would keep him while he was writing his first books. He pondered painfully and long over the propriety of taking her at her word, and attempting to prolong the relation. In the end he did not. He was afraid what she might think of him. He ought not, he felt, to trade upon her kindness. She could not help being bored by him; nor, in fact, could any one except a few male cronies who knew him intimately and had learned to value him by force of habit. That was his view; he was always frightened by new people, and couldn't suppose that they found him anything but dull and awkward.

So there was the end of Evelyn Arden; the end in a manner at all events. The recollection of her was habitual with him.

Only once did he get news of her; after that he wanted no more. . . . It was after he had been in London some years. He met her brother, slightly aged and fattened, at Hyde Park Corner; home for a holiday from the fruit farm in British Columbia for which the history Honours School had prepared him. They had lunch together, talking of old friends and what had become of them; after sedulously exhausting every other aspect of their last Eights Week, Hilton, as casually as he could, asked after his friend's sister. "Oh, I remember," said Arden, "you two made great pals, didn't you? As a matter of fact, she's out in India. She got married the year before last to a fellow she met out there. He's a judge or something of the sort. They haven't got any kids yet."

It wasn't civilised, Hilton told himself after that, to go on dreaming day dreams about another man's wife, simply because she had been decent to one. On occasion, for he was introspective and prided himself on the veracity of his analyses of life, he stopped in the middle of the sentimental recollection, which he did permit himself, of the happiest week in his life, by asking himself whether after all, he, like so many inexperienced and romantic youths, had not imagined her to be something finer, and especially abler, than she was. Had not a

fresh skin, clear grey eyes, the daintiness of a girl's dress, her voice, acting on one who had been virtually a young monk, had something to do with it? How much of her triple beauty had been her, and how much the long green reflections, slowly breaking and uniting, on the Cher, the drooping plumes of willow, the ripple by the boat, the dappled silks of the cushions, the murmur, the proud passage of swans? Had he not himself been so raw and illiterate at the time that any bookish prattle would have taken him in, the small talk of a clever and amiable young woman who knew how to make him conversationally comfortable? But no, he knew better. Her very sentences remained clear in his memory; the penetration of them, the subtlety and freshness of their humour and emotional colouring, the admirable turn of their phrasing; half a dozen such fragments would be quite sufficient to attest a really remarkable, if still immature, mind behind them, and a deep, true heart as well. He knew, however he might attempt to achieve disillusionment for the sake of its cold comfort, that there had been no mistake. Hard reason confirmed the spontaneous judgment of love; Evelyn Arden's had been, without exception, the nature most thoroughly in tune with his own, and her intelligence had surpassed that of any

other woman he had ever met. And often, a little wistfully, he would wonder whether she had ever seen any of his books; ask himself what she would think of the one now being written; and then, sometimes, lapse into a daydream. Evelyn was living with him. She was sharing his work, accompanying him on every imaginative adventure he had, telling him his mistakes, perceiving and praising every phrase that he knew to be wise or beautiful. Her presence bent over his shoulder, loving and encouraging, sheltering and strengthening. He dreamed; and then he awoke to his loneliness and resigned himself with a little laugh; for he was not one who would continuously luxuriate in a sorrow deliberately fed.

II

Sitting there in the Temple Gardens he saw again the twenty-five years which had passed since he had left the university. The earliest of them were years of hard struggle. He had a few friends in positions of some influence, and there were one or two editors who had noticed an unusual quality in his work; this meant that without much difficulty he established certain "connections" within a few months of his arrival in London. He was allowed to try his hand at re-

viewing for several papers, and no reviewer every worked more doggedly and honestly at his job. He took from the start "rooms," or rather a room, in a small street off Shepherd's Market. The neighbourhood was at once respectable and picturesque: a little huddle of old houses, quiet inns, small shops and stables, within a stone's-throw of Curzon Street on the one hand and Piccadilly on the other. The house was brick and of the eighteenth century; the rooms had panels, painted green or brown, there was no bathroom, and the landlord was a retired butler, a decent and deferential fellow, who had married a housekeeper as sober as himself. The other tenants were all "single gentlemen," who dressed better than they lived, and had friends richer than themselves; one of them wore a monocle, and all three were in the habit of sallying forth every evening with opera hats and ebony sticks. Hilton's room was on the ground floor, overlooking the street. It had a faded Victorian air; it was dignified in its shabbiness; the china ornaments were bad even in age, but the sporting prints were almost good. He let everything remain, procuring only a convertible couch instead of the too patent mahogany bed which stared at him on his arrival, entirely counteracting the sitting-room effect of the sofa, the mantelpiece, and the table

in the window, with its green plush cloth and twin-bottled inkstand.

There, after breakfast, he soon developed the habit of the morning's work; a brief walk in Green Park whilst the room was being "done," and he came back for three good hours of note-making and writing. In the afternoon he would usually pay his business calls, taking manuscripts to his offices and diffidently asking for books which he believed himself capable of reviewing, then sometimes proceeding to tea at one of the few houses he knew or at the Club in Piccadilly which he had been persuaded to join. His evenings were spent on original work or, more rarely, at dinner parties or theatres; he took two holidays a year and very occasionally was invited for week-ends in country houses. His reviews and critical essays in those first few years made him just enough to live on. Many less able and conscientious literary journalists made more. Characteristically he was unable to write rapidly; he could not bear to mislead the reader as to the precise extent of his knowledge or to present a plausible simulation of thought. He must really exercise his intellect even when he was contemplating a poor author. He propounded to himself such questions as "What does this man wish to do?" "How has he done it?" "How ought he to have

done it?" "What image will best represent the quality of his style?" "What are his intellectual and moral relations?" "What obscure motives are at work behind his writing?": and he was never satisfied until he had answered them all as precisely as he could. His interest in the workings of the human mind sometimes made him take too seriously a foolish and worthless author. He was often in difficulties about space; after all his labouring he would find it necessary to leave out three-quarters of what he had discovered; he tended also to leave out, by virtue of his very concentration upon essentials, the information which his employers most desired him to give—he failed to give the reader a clear idea as to whether the book was really worth buying or even looking at. Of this fact he never had more than a vague and occasional glimmering, but he agreed with his editors when, with a cheerful acceptance of the stock metaphor which marked the difference between them and him, they told him that he worked best on a large canvas. Behind his back they put it more crudely. They said that his short reviews were both incompetent and dull: "although of course there is always something in anything that Hilton writes, he has no sense of proportion, no gift of rapid summarisation, and no notion of his audience." They said

also that although they were always glad to see him they found it rather difficult to talk to him. He had none of the small change of conversation and seemed to know nothing about the literary world of which he was a member—nothing, at all events, that was of much service in a gossiping five minutes. On small provocation, with certain editors who were kind to him and knew how to show discreetly their respect for his mind, he would precipitate himself into a problem that interested him, eagerly expounding the results of long thought. They would lazily pretend to be taking in what he said; then a caller would appear, or the telephone bell would ring, or his host would begin to look as though he wanted to go on with his work. Words that grew familiar would be hurried at his ear: "Yes, it's extraordinarily interesting. We must have an evening together on it some time." And chilled but unresentful, he would go down the stairs with his doubts about Pascal, the form of the novel, Stendhal, Hazlitt, or the future of prose, still awaiting resolution. After a while he found books for review more difficult to obtain, though in the best quarters his longer studies were always warmly welcomed. For a brief period after the publication of his first novel he would have no difficulty in obtaining as much criti-

cal work as he wished; but by that time he was in a position to do what he had always intended to do, namely, devote himself entirely to fiction.

III

For his first novel made him a "name" which, for a time, in the narrow world of monthlies and superior weeklies, was worth something. He took three years over it, and put into it every ounce of intellectual concentration of which he found himself capable. The title was "A Foregone Conclusion," and, though not addicted to play upon words, he relished the fact that it meant something more than it seemed to mean, "foregone," in this instance, bearing chiefly its other, and renunciatory, significance. How he had finally and precisely defined the theme, the abnegation by a man of fifty, who felt himself young, of a marriage, and even of a proposal, to a young, intelligent and beautiful girl who would certainly have accepted him, does not much matter. But he could hardly deny the fact that both the character of the girl and the fact and importance of the loss had risen, like a smoke, from his own experience. He could not avoid them; all he could do, being very scrupulous about vulgarity and the wounding

of other people's feelings and on principle opposed to literal transcripts from life, was to disguise the lady physically so much as to make her unrecognisable, he hoped, even by herself. He changed her height, the colour of her eyes and hair, the pitch of her voice, the nature of her specific talents. He never grew quite reconciled to the changes, or easy with the handling of them; he found it impossible to regard the new hues as other than masks, disguises. However, the girl in the book appeared more consistent and at harmony with herself to others than she did to him, who could think no figure perfect which did not in every regard conform to the remembered ideal. Both characters, for what others there were present were very subsidiary, were applauded by those who enjoyed the book as being completely realised. Hilton was told by all the critics of importance that his knowledge of human psychology was profound, that his sagacity was equalled by his tenderness, that his work was the fine flower of centuries of culture, that every page of his book bore the marks of distinction, that his outlook was entirely his own, and that his English was admirable. He had fused, they said, his particular story and his general commentary on life and art, ethics and æsthetics; no writer had more consummately registered the finest shades of his

atmospheres or more cunningly selected the details of his backgrounds. He promised to be a prose master, one of the most illuminating of philosophical observers, one of the most masterly interpreters of the human heart. All this they said; and two thousand copies were sold on the strength of it. Hilton himself, honest about his own achievement, would, in a manner, have preferred that they should have been a little less unqualified; what they stated as his achievement he knew to be only his aim; still, his aim was at least perceived, and he could hope, with incessant labour and discipline, to approach nearer to it in time, though no man might ever completely succeed in it. All his old editors wrote to him for articles, though expressing doubt whether he would now have time for such things; certain hearty men in the Club who did not pretend to have read his book congratulated him unaffectedly on its success with those who were qualified to read it; an elderly novelist whom he admired wrote him a letter which he cherished long after the old man's death; and several rich women invited him out to luncheon parties where the elaborate food, the exquisite dresses, and the politicians' collars made him very ill at ease and the obvious despair of his hostesses. But the chief result of the respectful chorus was the action

taken by his publishers, Messrs. Donaldson. They had accepted the novel owing to an emphatic report by their reader; it was, moreover, part of their general policy, as behoved a firm which had been one of the three or four publishers-in-chief to the Great Victorians, to "nurse" authors who seemed likely to be ornaments of their country's literature, and perpetual sources of a steady revenue to boot. The immediate sales of "*A Foregone Conclusion*" were not large, but the critical consensus sufficed. Mr. Hilton was summoned to his second interview with Mr. Donaldson—then, in early middle age, Mr. Frank, only son of the senior partner of the time—and the publisher was handsome indeed. "Our opinion, Mr. Hilton," he said, "has been fully borne out by the critics. I do not know, of course, how far your income from novels may be of interest to you" (Mr. Hilton indicated that it was of great interest), "but I am prepared to offer you, on publication, an advance of £200 on your next book. I suppose you have one in preparation?"

"Yes," replied Hilton, "it is half done. It will be called '*The Contract*.'"

"A name of happy omen," said Mr. Donaldson, "for though I am not proposing at this moment a definite arrangement beyond your next book, I think I may say we are

prepared to back you until further notice. We are confident that you will be a success in the end, and although we must, for the sake of form, say that some time the arrangement may have to be varied, you may take it that for the time being we are ready to advance you £200 on every novel you write and to keep the accounts for each separate. I think it would be desirable that you should try to complete one each year in readiness for the autumn."

IV

On that allowance Ambrose Hilton, for fifteen years, had lived. The annual supply was not quite to his fastidious taste, but he continued it, and in the end became accustomed to the yoke. After all, he reflected, all art is content and mould, and a fixed allowance of time may be regarded as a difficulty akin to the fixed structure of the sonnet. Certainly he knew that neither his sincerity nor the intensity of his effort had ever flagged; and, as he gained in experience of life and of the medium, surely common sense ratified his honest conviction that his work in every regard had gone on deepening and strengthening. One or two faithful adherents for long maintained that, but these died or left the critical platform. The public

showed no appreciation of it whatever, and as the years passed he grew reconciled to diminishing notice. The second book was beyond doubt received with great respect, but here and there a warning was sounded. "Mr. Hilton," he was told by one of the leading pontiffs, "has scarcely fulfilled the promise of his first novel. His peculiar danger, in point of fact, was evident even there. His promise, it seems, may not mature, for he shows a progressive inclination to swamp his main theme with floods of analysis and general reflections which are at best interestingly irrelevant and at worst tedious." Passionately, with all the force he possessed, he would have contested that view had he found a suitable private occasion. He knew, how well! with what integrity he had observed the general shape which he had first conceived to be proper to his subject, how strictly he had confined himself to what seemed to him to be the business of a teller of such stories as his, with what labour of the mind and strain of the imagination he had endeavoured to define and elaborate relations and states of mind exactly in proportion to their richness and significance, how exhaustive and yet how fastidious in execution was the ideal type to which he was endeavouring to conform, even in tone and perfectly proportioned like a perfect painting.

They did not even see what he was trying to do! They thought he was losing his thread, wandering, even padding! With each successive work, each as he thought better than the last, the complaints grew at once sharper and briefer. The formula was found. In the cruder journals it took the simple outline of "Mr. Hilton gives us very little bread to an intolerable deal of sack." The more pretentious kind preferred to open with "Mr. Ambrose Hilton is a writer for whom we have always had a considerable respect," and a demonstration that their intelligence was fully equal to comprehending all that he said and meeting his erudition with an equal learning; but these also, with a mechanical regularity, complained that he dealt voluminously in trifles and did not seem to know what a story was. It puzzled him, though it did not embitter. He knew how exciting his stories were, he could conceive no chase more feverish than his after his elusive quarry. Any movement of the heart, any spoken or unspoken word, was likely to seem to him a momentous event; must "action" always and only be the burgling of a house, the escape with a rope-ladder, the explosion of a pistol, and was nothing worth describing but the obvious and garish surface of urban life? He could have put up his case, and he was convinced that

it was an overwhelming one; but his dreams of a community which would accompany him in his expeditions after a fuller and more thrilling life of heart and mind gradually faded. Sometimes he did wonder whether any practical steps that he might have taken would have made things easier for him. Did these men really read his books properly? Ought he to have mingled more with them? for most of them he had never met. Should he have joined Societies, and met other persons who wrote novels; he, who had not even taken steps to thrust himself upon the two or three living novelists whom he read and admired? Was he not too much of a recluse? Surely, without immodesty, he could claim to have broken some new ground, achieved some new beauty? Yet nobody—except a few friends who were kind—seemed to know it. His later books were scarcely criticised at all.

Once, departing from his usual scenes to carry out a project long cherished and long prepared for by reading and reflection, he attempted a reconstruction of ancient life, careful and full, with the utmost possible accuracy about the things which most concerned him and the last attenuation of shading. His background was the Alexandria of St. Clement, the brilliant city where, in a society of the highest cultivation, educated

paganism for the first time fought it out with educated Christianity. In his man and his woman he endeavoured to trace the finest operations of both influences with a genuine veracity, as they must, in such spirits, have been; the effort was immense, but he knew the book to be his best. It made no difference, but elicited one comment which completely baffled him. "This," ran the stricture, "is the sort of work which might have been produced had Henry James collaborated with their authors in something half-way between 'Salammbô' and 'Marius the Epicurean.'"

He scarcely saw the point about *Salammbô*, a book so physical, so loaded with material images; but he respected its author and was utterly astonished to find that the sentence was meant not as an eulogy but as an almost contemptuous condemnation. Naturally he never for a moment saw the possibility that his critic, over and above anything else, might well be one of those whose principal desire is to mention the maximum possible number of authors in a given space. In a forlorn way Hilton took as a compliment what was intended as a sneer; for a while the recollection of it comforted him; in the end he had to fall back for comfort upon his own conscience. He could see and he could state; such integrity would not be wasted; a pos-

terity, however small, would have regard for what his own age chose to ignore. For years no letter of appreciation reached him; even the requests, from Dakota and Kansas, for autographs ceased to arrive, for only the first two of his books were ever published, in whatever small quantities in America. He had settled down, he was informed, to a steady but a very small sale. Most habitual novelists, however obscure, could count on rather more; but most were in greater demand than he at the circulating libraries. He did not want vast notoriety, but this surely was failure. In his more confident moments he thought of himself as a man who should pour once a year a little phial of distilled water into the turbid tideway of the Thames, or as one playing a faint Sicilian reed against the blare of a Wagnerian climax. But there were other times when the thought of failure, real failure as an artist, crossed his mind. Never when he was at work, for that always took him out of himself and his daily world. But sometimes it happened in bed, in the darkness; sometimes as he took his daily stroll and the contrast was pointed between the rich equipages and smart clothes that passed him and his own neat shabbiness; and more than once, in later years, he was acutely aware of the possibility after his interviews,

which occurred with each manuscript, with an ageing Mr. Donaldson. Mr. Donaldson was always courteous and kind, yet his first warmth insensibly wore off. After the sixth novel had been published it occurred to Hilton that there was a faint new tinge in his very proofs of faith. Hilton was too much in awe of him to subject him to a thorough scrutiny when he was in his presence; and the total comprehension of Mr. Donaldson was a thing he would never have hoped to arrive at even had the inner Mr. Donaldson genuinely awakened his finer curiosity, which it did not. Yet Mr. Donaldson's expression was interesting and an image of the elusive shade stole at last into Hilton's mind. As he signed the yearly contract, renewed the yearly salary—for it had virtually become that—there was just fleetingly visible in the colour of his resolution the expression of a Curtius who had engaged himself to leap, not once but annually, into the gulf. Had Mr. Donaldson altogether lost faith? Had Mr. Donaldson ever had faith or concerned himself with faith? Hilton did not know. All he knew was that Mr. Donaldson had at last given him his death warrant with great kindness; that there was now, in the opinion of an experienced judge, no chance whatever that he should ever reach that position of established esteem which he had

hoped to deserve, that he could not live on the hundred a year which had come from a great-aunt nine years ago, and that it might well be that his worst dreads were well founded, that there had been a breach always between his conception and his expression, that nothing he wrote seemed to others what it seemed to him, that in short he was an intelligent second-rate writer without a vocation, a failure, a failure doubly.

v

Over forty; no future; no training; nowhere to go; nothing to do. There he sat in the sharp sunlight reviewing the past in fragments interspersed—for long habit could not be broken—with half-hearted observations of the life around him, tentative gropings for the right epithet for a woman's bloom under her veil, for the glint of light on the band-stand top, for the colour of the embankment parapet, for the scurry of straws across the asphalt at his feet. He did not see the expanse of his adult years as an ordered progress; stray voices and faces, long forgotten, came again, people he had met only once, parties, far back, where he had been taken seriously, 'hours of elation, his first reviewing jobs, books scarcely recalled given to him by men of whom he

had lost sight, his first welcome from the press, the completion of his favourite book, delicious days of his holidays in Arles and Naples and by the Dutch canals; scraps from an innumerable host of such, all within the power of divine memory to recover, all but a preface to the sombre reality to-day. The face of Evelyn Arden hovered over it all. Big Ben struck and he rose. He walked aimlessly back to the Strand and lunched in a cheap teashop off a poached egg and a pot of tea, bleak on a marble table. The confusion of tongues, the constant shuffling of incomers and outgoers, the harassment and hurry of the waitresses, irritated his fatigued nerves. He was sick of London and the struggle and worry of it. He must get away somewhere. He walked to the bank and drew ten pounds, to his room and packed a bag, and then went to Paddington and took a third-class ticket to Warchester. It was a peaceful and a homely place, his favourite among all the cathedral cities, a summary of all the English periods. He knew nobody there, but he knew a good inn; and he had not been there for years.

VI

When Hilton finished his chop and his beer in the ample and ancestral coffee-room

of the "Dragon" at Warchester it was nine o'clock. He went to his bedroom for no particular reason and then came down again; he entered the billiard room and blushing declined a game and then returned to the hall; he studied the programmes of the local music-hall and the forthcoming Fat Cattle Show, the mementoes of Royal Visits, and the tariffs of long abandoned mail coach services, looked at a stuffed pike, a caseful of bright-eyed jays, goldfinches, bullfinches, and woodpeckers, and several red-jacketed time tables, and then, feeling too restless to go to bed, resigned himself to the notion of a walk and put on his overcoat and hat. No sooner had he left the door and the clamour of the bar behind him than he was rejoiced that he had made his decision. The old High Street, full of gables of all periods reduced to one antiquity in the cold and brilliant moonlight, was empty of traffic, an avenue of mottled silver and dark shadows. Passers-by were few and quiet. There was no wind and hard frost was closing in; as he walked along the dark southern pavement listening to his own footsteps in the solitude, peace fell upon his trouble. He paused at the end of the street where the stone bridge arches over the river, and leant over the parapet. Calm in the moonlight was the water, broken by a few slow ripples; on one side the

walls stood sheer, on the other, ranged in receding series like the flat trees of a theatre, stooping willows dipped their long ghostly tresses to the stream. He was lost in that loveliness; yet a shiver of cold made him stamp his feet and walk briskly on till an archway brought him into the Close and high above its shining lawns towered the great cathedral, phantasmal in the moon, shadowed with buttresses and statuary. In former years he had seen it many times; admired its perfect proportions seen from whatever angle, the delicate strength of its detail; thought with humility on the devotion and wisdom of the great unknown builders who had raised it in an age of more simplicity and certainty, when belief spoke naturally in beauty. To-night the detail was dim and no thought of human builders crossed his mind; the cathedral did not seem an edifice of stones, cunningly placed one by one, but a great insubstantial flower, something which had bloomed there in sudden completion, not touched by mortal hands, a vision which had dawned and might vanish. Hilton sighed deeply and turned from its spectral magic; but as he perceived the long line of the houses in the Close another feeling, a feeling of acute loneliness, came over him. Their lit windows were ranged there, yellow or red blinded, in a

long, low uneven line; as he walked across the intervening turf their homely Georgian fronts, porticoed and trellised, grew into distinctness. Music faintly reached him; a voice, a piano and violin. Warmth, security, gentle companionship were there; but he, an outcast, was walking friendless in a strange town. Ordinarily shy and self-contained, content to forgo the general society for which he was unfitted, and seldom, in his own quarters, unable to make satisfactory terms with seclusion, he now longed wistfully for an escape from his solitude, and would gladly have called on even the slightest acquaintance, had he known such to be in the city, and had he been able to dare the intrusion. Then, suddenly, an ironic truth flashed across his mind. There must be people in that town who knew him, though he did not know them; people, even perhaps, who liked him, and would be delighted to welcome him. Ambrose Hilton, after so long a career of disappointment, was not inclined to exaggerate the number of his adherents; he had never been in the way of meeting them, and he did not know who they were. But presumably, with his minute but "steady" sale, there must be some. He was no favourite of the libraries, and the supposition that Messrs. Donaldson persuaded, by lavish advertisement, a fresh

lot of innocents to buy each of his novels as it came out, was untenable, for they had long ceased to advertise them at all, except in the barest annunciatory way. No; there might be thousands who had two of his novels apiece, or hundreds who had many or most of them. He amused himself sadly with the arithmetic. Warchester, though a small city, must contain a more than average proportion of cultivated persons. Very likely there were—well, two households in Warchester where a conscious penchant for Hilton's novels was confessed, two readers who were familiar with that long series of his thoughts, who knew, very likely, when he was born, and even what he looked like, who might consequently be glad,—even, he joked incredulously, honoured—to receive him, did they know he was wandering loneliness about their streets. Call it two. He tried to picture them: an intelligent undergraduate home for the vacation, a thin-faced contemplative ecclesiastic, a pair of gracious spinsters with greying hair. “Even in this house, perhaps,” he thought, as through three lit windows with half-drawn curtains he caught glimpses of mahogany, old silver, and the corner of full shelves. Footsteps came suddenly upon him, and at the gate, within a few yards of him, a dark form fell on the ground with a moan.

Hilton stooped, raised her head, and found she was at once heavy and in a dead faint: a rubicund woman gone pale, middle-aged, pathetic in the light that filtered from a window through the railings. There was nothing for it but to explore the Christian charity of a Cathedral close. People were obviously up in the house and it was not quite ten: he gave a little ring, and tapped quietly with the pretty brass knocker in case the servants should have gone to bed, leaving his charge perforce on the ground with his overcoat under her head. A maid came. "I'm so sorry to trouble you," said Hilton, using his accustomed opening sentence for every kind of conversation, "but a lady seems to have fainted on your doorstep, and I thought perhaps you might have a little brandy."

"Why, certainly, sir," exclaimed the maid, pleasantly excited, "won't you please to come in while I tell master?"

"No, thank you," he replied instinctively, "I think I'd better hold her." He went out to the pavement again, listened to the patient's breathing and counted what he supposed to be her pulse without having the slightest notion how numerous it should be. Then to the lighted door came tripping the blushing maid-servant, carrying a cut-glass tumbler of yellow liquid, followed by a

sturdy silver-haired gentleman in dinner jacket and black tie. They stepped across the three yards of garden path.

"Oh," exclaimed the maid, "why it's Cook!"

The three of them carried her in. She was given the restorative and assisted to a sofa, where she came round. At last "quite all right now," she was led away by her junior colleague, and Hilton, acutely feeling that he was no member of this family circle, attempted to go. "Certainly not, sir," said his host, emphatically, "put that coat down. Now sit down yourself. Will you have a whisky or would you rather have a brandy?" On the edge of a chair Hilton did sit, observing it was really very late and he was sure his host was just going to bed. "Certainly not, sir, why I've only just made the fire up. Say when!" As he sipped his whisky, drew the first puffs of his cigar, and sank gradually into his deep armchair, growing comfortably warm, Hilton glanced rapidly round at the admirable old furniture, the numerous bookcases, large and glass-fronted or small and open, the baby-grand piano, the desk, the mirrors in which the candles filed away in endless diminishing series, and the pictures. There were engravings, early water-colours, a few dimly seen

oils, which might be Samuel Scott's and Bonington's.

"Interested in pictures?" asked his host.

"Yes; especially in those of your period."

A new interest appeared in his host's small, puckered eyes, and his rather grim, square face assumed a new liveliness. He showed Hilton what he had in the room. Then he sat down again. "But you don't," he said, "live anywhere near the Cathedral here, do you?"

"Oh dear no," replied the novelist, "I'm only here for the night. I was out for a moonlight walk."

"Might I take the liberty of asking your name? Mine is Dawkins."

"Hilton, I'm called."

"An odd coincidence," said Mr. Dawkins. "Although I daresay you might have found the same thing on a good many other nights. As a matter of fact, when you knocked, I was just reading a book by a namesake of yours."

Hilton looked at the little table by his host's elbow. There was no doubt about that rough blue cover. "Does it happen to be 'The Lost Torch?' " he asked.

"Yes. Do you happen to know it?"

"As a matter of fact," said Hilton, blush-

ing, "I wrote it myself. How extraordinary!"

The man's grim face lit up. "You don't mean it, sir! Are you Mr. Ambrose Hilton? Well, well, I never thought to have such luck. And I'd just finished the book. Take another whisky. Yes, you must. You needn't think I'm going to let you go now for a bit."

"Are you sure you don't want to go to bed?" asked Hilton, feebly and insincerely.

"Certainly not. I am always late even when alone."

Whilst Hilton was being conventionally catechised about his visit, and his previous visits, to Warchester, his thoughts darted back, with irony, pleasure and surprise, to his recent meditations in the moonlight, and the odd statistical calculation in particular. So here was one of the two Warchester devotees whom the law of averages seemed likely to allow him. Such actually existed; he was not merely read, and praised in kindness, by his London acquaintance. Mr. Dawkins, who was obviously nothing if not blunt and straightforward, began to unbosom himself on the subject of Hilton's work and position, a subject which he was clearly not in the habit of discussing every day. "I don't," he said, "go about very much and I don't know many people who

read, but I imagine your circulation is not very large, Mr. Hilton?"

"I'm afraid it isn't," said Hilton, looking at his boots.

"I daresay," continued Mr. Dawkins, "that the Dean and Chapter have never so much as heard of you."

"Only too likely, I fear," replied Hilton, amused by this candour. "I can hardly say that I have been a success."

"Well," his host went on, swishing from the syphon as he began, "that is what I simply cannot understand. Still, it depends what you call a success. I must tell you that you have given me more pleasure than any living writer. I have all your books here," indicating shelves sunk in the white panelling next his chair, "and there are few that I have not read twice, some three times. It's only in the last few years, since I came here, that I have read much," (Hilton pictured him as having been in business abroad, America, say, or Hongkong) "and I dare-say some of these modern things may be beyond my comprehension. But I simply can't get on with most of them. Some are silly, some are pretentious; even the clever ones do not give one anything to bite on. I may be old-fashioned, but I like a novelist to think and to be ample. I want him to create a world for me, not to give me brilliant

scraps. You do that. I daresay some of them find you too tough for them, or not exciting enough. There may be other books like yours; if so I haven't come across them." He proceeded, with the simplicity of the man unaccustomed to literary conversation, to tell Hilton much that he knew already about his characters, his style, his descriptions, his view of life. Possibly some of the last finesses of language and imagery may have escaped so hard-headed and, in a manner, inexperienced a reader, but this could only be guessed; for even where he could not precisely define his satisfaction he plainly received it. Here, thought Hilton, was one of the Warchester readers; a better could hardly be hoped for in an imperfect world. Was there really, could there ever have been, a second? "Now here," said Mr. Dawkins, continuing his explanation, "is the sort of thing I mean." He drew from the tight shelf the last novel but one, a well-worn copy, ran through it, found a page, and handed it to Hilton with a finger pointing to a paragraph. There was a pencilled line down the whole margin.

"Yes," said Hilton, "that cost me a lot of trouble, and I admit I was pleased with it. I see you have the habit of marking your books. I have myself."

"No," replied Mr. Dawkins, "in point of

fact I don't. Something stops me. That book, and some of the others, are full of marks, but they are not mine. The volumes are duplicates. They belonged to a friend of mine who used to live here: actually the friend who introduced me to your works, for which I am eternally thankful. You can see how freely that one is marked." Hilton turned the pages and looked at the pencil-marks, long and short. Yes, freely; and how wisely, how percipiently! Scarcely a sentence was marked which he had not known, or at least hoped, to be exceptionally good. He noticed page after page, line after line: his most carefully built pictures, his most delicate and evanescent shades of emotion and characterisation, the most poignant of his moments of spiritual experience, his faintest subsmiles, the finest turns of his discreet music: all had been surely seized by an eye and a heart that nothing true and good could escape and, as it seemed, nothing half-done deceive. He looked up; Mr. Dawkins, his legs outstretched and his hands in the side-pockets of his jacket, was gazing into the fire.

"Your friend," Hilton remarked, "must have been an extremely good critic."

"Yes," Mr. Dawkins answered musingly, without moving his head. Hilton turned a few more pages. The only thing which sur-

prised him was that sometimes the pencil had noted sentences he had thought commonplace though honest maxims about life and so on, and sentences to the deepest meaning of which he had thought himself alone to have the key, words into which his own inner conflicts had betrayed him, words, well enough to any eye, but to himself known as the vehicles for his personal loss and longing and an old private grief.

"But," he said, "I am rather puzzled that some rather ordinary sentences should have been marked. I suppose one can never be sure what one's words convey to any one else."

"Never, I suppose."

"I should like to have met your friend," Hilton went on, "he must have been unusual."

"Not he," said Mr. Dawkins, "she. It was a lady."

It surprised Hilton, who, unaccustomed to visualising even his men readers, had never supposed himself to appeal to women, with whom he thought himself too dull, too preoccupied with intellectual things, even to converse with success. "She has left Warchester, then?" he asked.

"She is dead," said Mr. Dawkins, a sigh implicit in the words. He paused. A flame leapt in the fire and the ticking of the clock

became audible. "That is why I have some of her books; she left instructions that I was to take anything I liked. I cannot tell you the difference it has made to me or what she did for me, the kindest of friends. She came here to live a year or two before me; her house was just across the Close. She lived a quiet life, alone, but she must have given happiness wherever she went. She admired you very much. If that isn't success, I should like to know what is. Now I come to think of it, I won't swear that she didn't say that she had once met you."

"What was she called?"

"Her name was Mrs. Howard."

"I have met several Howards, but I doubt if they liked my books."

"Possibly I am mistaken. Anyhow it must have been so long ago that you could hardly be expected to remember her. Perhaps it was before she married. Her husband was a judge. Before she came here as a widow, she was in India for many years."

India! Hilton nearly dropped the book that was in his hands: his worthless book, the Dead Sea fruit that he would have destroyed in a moment for a glimpse of what returned to his mind. India! name of mysterious import, but associated for him with one thing only, all its tribes and potentates, temples and elephants, jungles and deserts, beasts,

hill-stations, myths, mountains, rivers, sunlight, soldiery, a vague and inchoate background to one woman long gone from sight but perpetually imagined. He forced himself to say something, wondering that he saw no sign that Mr. Dawkins had an inkling that his heart was pounding, that he was controlling a trembling body, that something was happening to the skin of his face. Could this incredible coincidence have happened? No, no, it must not be true that Evelyn Arden was dead. India was a vast place and Warchester a small; he might have met a Mrs. Howard. As he talked of indifferent things, his eyes kept glancing at the pages which his shaking fingers turned. There was another stray sentence marked: on the very last page: a casual conjunctive sentence from a long final meditation: "a word twenty years ago might have made all the difference." Full of dread but unable to refrain, wanting to cry aloud, he went back to the beginning and turned to the fly-leaf. There it stood, small, motionless, confronting his moist eyes: the signature, unreal as to the second half of it, "Evelyn Howard": a slight pencilled name in the small but bold hand of another time, not a stroke of the "Evelyn" changed from those old signatures which he knew by heart. With a great effort, he prevented himself from breaking

down. The room swam round a vision of the ghost who had visited it as it were but yesterday; the clock ticked "Dead, dead, dead, dead." He set his face hard. "I think I remember Mrs. Howard now," he said: "I hope she did not suffer before she died."

Mr. Dawkins looked up, with a slightly puzzled expression. "No," he said, rising as Hilton had risen, "she died suddenly. She was still young and very beautiful. Must you go? Well, I shall always remember this visit and be grateful to Cook for fainting." They went out into the hall, and he continued: "Let me help you on with your coat. It is a cold night. The moon is still up. I should be honoured if you would come again some time. Now I think of it, there is somebody else in Warchester who would be sorry to miss a chance of seeing you. That's Miss Penfold, of the High School, who is a great disciple of yours. I suppose you couldn't come here to-morrow for tea with her if I could arrange it?"

"I should have been very glad," said Hilton, his face turned to the night, "but I shall be obliged, after all, I think, to leave Warchester by the first train to-morrow. You have been very kind. I hope we shall meet again. Good-night." The door shut behind him and his footsteps rang again on the stones.

IV: THE GOLDEN SCILENS

I

LITTLE Mackenzie Wile lived with his little wife in a little flat near Walham Green. He was half Scotchman and half Jew: an alarming combination on paper but, in this instance, not at all alarming in the flesh. A more agreeable and harmless little pair than he and his wife never existed: everybody who knew them shared their regret that they had no children, though adding the silent rider that perhaps it was just as well in one way because they found it hard enough to live as it was. People who knew him very slightly would refer to him kindly behind his back as "poor little Mackenzie," though they addressed him as "Wile"; he was very seldom Mistered, whether in his presence or out of it. "A good little soul," they would say; and "he really does know an awful lot about some things"; and, more pompously, "he is an extraordinary mixture of shrewdness and simplicity."

The simplicity was always charming and the shrewdness was sometimes useful. Men

smiled in a friendly way when they conjured up a picture of him: the small shabby figure, the round head, the crinkly fair hair growing thin on top, the wide eyes behind the round spectacles, the squat fleshy nose, the small fair moustache over a mouth half-open in a timid apologetic smile. He always peered round an editor's door with the look of one who feared to be thrown downstairs, and wished to disarm the enemy by a frank revelation of his willingness to go at a word if he was not wanted. Yet who could have had the heart to kick him out? He would often, so peculiar was his scale of values, show surprise as well as regret when proposals were "turned down" which nobody but he would have made. Sometimes he wished a weekly to take a full-length review article on a young Polish novelist whom he thought ought to be translated; sometimes he desired eight pages in a congested monthly for the full exposition of a new fact he had discovered regarding the parentage or place of marriage of some Elizabethan writer, a Greene or a Marston, or a new theory as to the printer of some volume of sonnets by Googe or Watson. *He* was very interested, so why was not everybody? It all seemed very arbitrary to him, but he made all the suggestions he could, and every now and then his suggestions were welcomed. The

weeklies gave him a few books to review; the *Times Literary Supplement* occasionally printed a bibliographical communication from him as "From a Correspondent"; and at times, because something about which he knew had become fortuitously topical, he appeared with a full-dress article in one of the solid reviews. Odd paragraphs he produced in numbers, and he received two or three times a week postcards ending "I expect you know about this: could you do us a note?" He did hack translation and he engaged in a little private trading. He knew all the booksellers, and when he bought from one to sell to another, neither minded, because they all liked Wile, and they all made their profits, and they all on occasion got valuable information and advice from him. This is all put in the past tense: to-day, happily, Mackenzie Wile need no longer work as hard as he did, and his little wife, though she still sews and knits incessantly, no longer has to conceal her worries under a brave face. From the way in which this remarkable transformation took place several lessons may be drawn. One is that we can never tell when a hobby, any hobby, may not turn out to be useful; and another that Mackenzie's simplicity was distinctly limited and his shrewdness even more eminent than his friends had suspected.

If there is one thing more than another which Mackenzie really enjoyed, it was the study of booksellers' catalogues. At breakfast he usually had one propped against his tea-cup; his evenings off were invariably devoted to the pastime. Sometimes he had urgent work to do, and once or twice a month some literary friend would generously come in for a talk. This would cause a commotion. Both the Wiles would give the guest an eager welcome, there would be a magnanimous contest over the only comfortable arm-chair, and Mackenzie, after a hurried search in the bedroom for his wife's purse, would run out to the Walham Arms for three bottles of beer. Most nights were free, however, and while his consort sewed Mackenzie would pore over the latest catalogues, from the shops and the salerooms, with a stub of pencil in his hand and a jumble of worn reference books on the floor beside him. He could seldom buy anything unless it was very cheap and promised, at need, an easy profit; but he learnt and he loved to learn. Once a month, perhaps, tempted by something about which he had special knowledge or by a large assortment of unclassified old books which might contain treasure, he attended an auction for an hour or two: if he bid for a small lot or two the booksellers did not unduly embarrass him by competition.

It was, therefore, only in the ordinary course of things that he should have visited Hodgeby's rooms on the Monday morning when the tenth instalment of the celebrated Vernon collection of manuscripts was on view, preparatory to the sale on the following day. He had studied the catalogue closely, and there were many interesting and valuable items; in any event he would not have willingly missed an important stage in the slow dispersal of that vast and historic collection which was taking even more years to break up than had been occupied in its formation.

He spent most of the morning by the shelves, examining illuminated missals, fragments of plays, old vellum deeds, bundles of letters, poems, ecclesiastical accounts: for Sir William Vernon's taste, if it deserved such a name, was very catholic, and he would buy anything so long as it was hand-written and old. Mackenzie would have liked to linger over many of the lots, but he dared not waste time, and his progress was made all the quicker owing to the fact that he always modestly evacuated a place which any larger and redder man seemed desirous of occupying. He was not a prospective purchaser and he did not wish to intrude. Yet, just before noon, he reached a corner which for some time he showed no inclination to

leave: and he became so absorbed in a volume that those who wished to reach something beyond him were forced rudely to nudge him out of the way. Brooks of Oxford Street noticed him with amusement. "What's he found now?" he remarked with a smile to another trade friend of Mackenzie's. "Oh, some curio or other, I suppose," said the friend. Mackenzie was oblivious. At last, unobtrusively slipping his volume back into its inconspicuous place, he turned, and with a firmness of movement that he had never achieved before, strode out into the street and performed an action he had never performed before. He hailed a cab.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

"British Museum. Go like hell," said Mackenzie, not even blushing at the unusual strength of his own language. The cabman approximated as nearly as he could to his instructions, and in five minutes pulled up outside the solitude where flocks of Venus' doves softened the austerity of Minerva's pillars. "Wait," said Mackenzie; and hastened up the gravel without giving the dubious cabby an option. He scuttled through the hall and down the corridor to the Reading Room, nodding to the attendant, who knew him well. Behind the central ring of counters he espied the bald head and black moustache of Mr. Curtain, the very man he wanted,

and, by a stroke of luck, in the Reading Room. Mr. Curtain came to his message.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I must have a few minutes with you before lunch," said Mackenzie.

"Well?"

"I can't talk here. It is really important. Take me to a private room. I promise it's worth while."

"Come along then," said Curtain, pursing his lips resignedly, and they went off through a swing door to the corner where one of the greatest of experts made epochs in bibliographical history. Mackenzie pulled a Hodgeby catalogue out of his pocket, laid it down, opened at the last lots, and said, with an abruptness that startled his companion, who had always regarded him as the mildest of Museum frequenters:

"It's about this!"

"What's about what?" asked Mr. Curtain very reasonably.

"I'll tell you in a minute. I'm talking to you in the completest confidence, as I know that keen as you are on the Museum my secret will be safe with you. Do you know a rich man who can be trusted?"

"Rather a large order, isn't it?" observed Mr. Curtain. "But I daresay I might think of one if you gave me a few moments. . . . Yes, I do. There is a friend of mine called

Campbell. He is a rich man, and he is completely honest. . . . Of course he inherited his money."

Mackenzie Wile fastened upon the essential and neglected the trimmings. "I want to see him at once," he said, "and I will tell you why."

* * * * *

Half an hour afterwards, talking excitedly in whispers, they reappeared in the Reading Room. Mr. Curtain passed one of his colleagues. "I may not be back at all this afternoon," he remarked. Outside, Wile's cabman, in the last stages of hope deferred, was attempting to engage a policeman in conversation. His strained look vanished as he caught sight of his long-lost fare.

"Tell him where to go, please," said Mackenzie.

"460 Addison Road," said Mr. Curtain.

"Have you got enough for the fare on you?" inquired Mackenzie.

"That's all right," said Mr. Curtain.

As they ran along the streets behind Oxford Street they were both too excited to talk, but occasionally the little man drove in points he had made already. "Of course, as I said," he remarked several times, "it is only a guarantee I want from Mr. Campbell. It's quite likely that I shan't need his money. It might go for next to nothing," and "You

must go straight up there after lunch. They'd better not see us together. For goodness' sake don't look at it too long, or some one will smell a rat. They know you too well."

"All right," Mr. Curtain kept replying. As they stopped outside the house in Addison Road he cheered his companion with a last reassurance. "I'm sure," he said, "that Campbell will back you. It would amuse him, and he likes to see business men done down."

II

The sale at Hodgeby's was the most notable of the season, and the only occasion on which the rooms were crowded. Every dealer in London was there, though few of them expected to get much that was worth having against the competition of the American book-kings who had come over especially for the sale: Mr. Ling, of New York, who was staying at Claridge's; Mr. Hopkins, of Philadelphia, who was staying at the Carlton; and Major Levinstein, of Chicago, who was staying at the Ritz. These three magnates, all wearing confident smiles, sat at the big table in the middle; they were some distance apart and occasionally chaffed each other between the events. Around them

were their British confrères; behind them a dense miscellany of poor and rich, including several noble collectors who had never been to an auction before, two or three ladies on the arms of explanatory cavaliers, small bookselling fry from the suburbs, journalists, bibliographers, clerks and pedlars. Mr. Curtain was there, no doubt with a watching brief for the Museum; Mr. Wile was also there, holding no communication with Mr. Curtain; and in a corner of the room behind the hammerman's rostrum, wearing an unrestrained smile, was a sunburnt man of middle age, with a silk hat, a monocle and a bushy fair beard. To the picture dealers of London he was well known as Mr. Sinclair Campbell; some of the booksellers might have recollected the name as that of an infrequent purchaser of classics through the post, but they were unacquainted with his face and took no notice of his presence.

The morning's proceedings, after a quiet beginning, were thrilling enough. Prices ran high; when the Saint Louis Book of Hours came on, the slight nods and faint syllables of the great Americans produced the effect of an artillery battle; by lunch time a hundred lots had gone, and tens of thousands had been spent, most of it by Mr. Ling, and most of the rest by the Major and Mr. Hopkins. There was a loud buzz

of released chatter when the adjournment came and the principal buyers went off to fortify themselves with champagne for further plunges. Mr. Wile went with the rest down the stairs. Just outside he met Mr. Campbell, who took him affably to the next corner and then whispered in his ear: "It's all right, my boy. I said you could go to five hundred if anybody smells a rat. But I find it amusing in there. I don't care if it's thousands. You can go on as far as you like. If it looks like breaking me, I shall take my hat off, and then you can stop. I shall be back at two-thirty."

He was. So was Mr. Curtain. Mackenzie Wile, after a gobble at a tea-shop, was back long before. Time, he found, was dragging intolerably now. He watched the clock crawl, and wondered if the sale would ever be resumed; he listened wearily to the jocular conversations of men who seemed to think the day a day like other days: he surprised one acquaintance who addressed him by answering with something very like curtness. "Well, I'm hanged," thought the man, "it's like being charged by a rabbit." At last the auctioneer climbed again to his pulpit and his voice rang out announcing the next lot. Scattered voices, an inquiry, a few taps of the hammer, and then the same sequence in monotonous repetition.

Mr. Curtain came back to his corner, and Mr. Campbell, replete and almost grinning, to his. More big lots turned up; there were prolonged encounters, and deep breaths were drawn as the giants advanced their bids, now in tens, now in fifties, now in hundreds, and once, for a wild half-minute, in thousands. The room grew dimmer; the lights were turned on; the end of the day's business was approaching. Most of the general public gradually dispersed, and the Major and Mr. Hopkins, glutted, took their leave also. Mr. Ling, alone of the Americans, remained; but he had snapped the elastic over his notebook and looked rather like a man who was seeing something out; perhaps he wanted to watch the London booksellers, who had remained in force, hoping to pick up a few things towards the end. Lot 190 went for twenty-five shillings: the laconic diary of a French officer in the Seven Years' War. Lot 191 fetched even less: some letters from Miss Anna Seward. As 193 drew near our poor Mackenzie felt like bursting; he tried to keep his face still and dared not catch any human eye. The moment came. The auctioneer held up a bundle; "No. 193, three domestic account books, one of them of the early seventeenth century." An attendant took it from him and passed it down to the table, around which sat a dozen booksellers.

They glanced at each book: two of them were patently late and dull, and the other was indecipherable, except for an occasional headline such as "For Ye Ague," "To Roste a Capon." Hardly worth having on a day like this! "A pound?" suggested the auctioneer. No voice replied, as Mackenzie, with magnificent will-power, controlled himself lest eagerness should breed suspicion. "Well, ten shillings," said the auctioneer, sighing over the meanness and shortsightedness of mankind.

"Ten," broke out Mackenzie, in a voice so unintentionally loud that he could not help blushing. Somebody at the table flapped the parcel over again and nodded carelessly: "Fifteen shillings bid. A pound for 193. Twenty-five shillings bid." Mackenzie's rival glanced at him; he knew him and chanced it. "Two pounds," he said. "Ten," said Mackenzie. "Three pounds," replied the other bidder, and now a wizened and spectacled dealer with a walrus moustache looked up from his calculations, and cut in with three pounds ten. "Four pounds," continued Mackenzie. "Five," said the first; then, as though involuntarily, a lay spectator at the back suddenly committed himself to six, and looked sorry for it. "Seven," mechanically proceeded Mackenzie.

"Wonder who he's bidding for," whispered Brooks of Oxford Street to his neighbour, for they both knew the limits of Wile's purse. Mackenzie was unconscious of comment, and went on to nine pounds.

It was at this point that Mr. Ling, who had been meditating, began to take notice. He had done very well, and felt like a little sport. How slowly these Britishers (for he always used that offensive term) were creeping up; how cautiously they schemed for this bit of old rubbish. Now was the opportunity for a little jovial Napoleonism just to oxygenise 'em. "Ten pound bid," remarked the auctioneer, scarcely able to conceal his astonishment; the astonishment broke through all his guards when, emphatic and nasal, the voice of the American rang out "Fifty."

Mr. Ling always stopped smiling when he made a joke; but almost everybody else laughed aloud as this monstrous extinguisher came down on the competitors. "No hope of a secretive purchase now," was the expression which Mr. Curtain read on Mackenzie's resolute face: "The landslide has begun and I'm going full out." "Sixty," said Mackenzie; "A hundred," rejoined Mr. Ling. The professionals looked bewildered. What had Wile found out? Was Ling merely coming in on spec.? or did he know too? One of

them, unable to resist temptation, came in next with "a hundred and ten," which Mackenzie capped with "a hundred and fifty," and Mr. Ling with "two hundred." The bidding had now emerged from its slow peregrination through obscure byways and was bowling down a broad boulevard in the full view of all. "Three hundred," said Mackenzie. "Fifty," said Ling, and then his humble rival, with a sharp snap, fired out "five hundred."

There was a loud rustle, and a noise like that which greets the ascension of fireworks. Mr. Ling paused: the joke was going too far; what was this darned old account-book anyway? But the challenge had been his and he did not like to be beaten. With a completely impassive face he broke all records by advancing in a leap to two thousand.

Mackenzie stole a glance at Mr. Campbell. He saw with agony Mr. Campbell's hands moving towards his hat, then with inexpressible relief observed Mr. Campbell to clutch both rims of it firmly and squeeze it down on his head, his eyeglass remaining firmly set and his white teeth showing through his beard. It was still all right. "Going," announced the auctioneer. "Three thousand," shouted Mackenzie Wile. Mr. Ling shook his head and stood up; the hammer came down with a smack; and the room broke into

loud applause, as men always will in such places when they think somebody has given too much for something. Strangers slapped Mackenzie on the back; Mr. Ling himself then struggled through to him.

"Well, boy," he said with an admiring gaze, "I'm darned if I know what we were bidding for, but I'm glad you've got it." The implied question was not answered; Mackenzie was preoccupied with getting his prize away. A deposit was asked for; a cheque was promptly written out by Mr. Campbell; a bank was telephoned to; and three men stole away to tea in Addison Road.

"It was worth it," smugly remarked Mr. Campbell as they parted later, "and remember it's a loan from me. The purchase is yours."

* * * * *

Seven days later, after the first undirected curiosity had been forgotten, the booksellers of two continents were biting themselves with rage.

All wars, all race-meetings, all debates, all prize-fights that first morning faded into nothingness as the posters, the headlines, the leading articles were unanimously devoted to the one great theme: the rediscovery, inside what they picturesquely called "Ann Hathaway's Diary," of a scene from *Hamlet* in Shakespeare's handwriting, the original

MS., freely corrected. Cables flashed the news to all the zones; millionaires in Los Angeles telephoned agents in New York about it; ambassadors officially informed kings, still in bed; and the embattled professors of Germany rejoiced as one man at the prospect of new pasture. Wile's literary friends uproariously drank his health in public houses; and multitudes of more respectable Englishmen thought it scandalous that a fellow like this Wile, not a business man at all, should make a fortune simply because of a great deal of undeserved luck and a little silly learning.

This was the story, in summary, that they all read. Mackenzie Wile, the well-known critic and bibliographer (portrait, inset) was looking over the shelves at Hodgeby's when his attention was arrested by a small volume of early Jacobean date in Old English script. The volume was a mixed collection of recipes for the table and for diseases, and domestic memoranda of one sort or another, a collection of a kind commoner in a later age than in that. The writing was difficult to read, and had probably never been read since the first owner's death; certainly Sir William Vernon would never have attempted to read it. Mr. Wile, a skilled palæographer, deciphered much of it and his curiosity was aroused by one or two dates, initials and

family names—for the writer had sometimes put down the sources of her remedies as well as notes about birth and deaths. “Hall” and “Hart” and “Judith” were amongst those which first struck Mr. Wile. He might perhaps have finally laid the volume aside had he not noticed a word, faded, brown and Gothic looking, on the inside front cover. The covers, of vellum, had (as often happened) been stiffened by sheets of old manuscript laid within them and covered with flap edges. Turning the book in his hand, Mr. Wile saw the bottoms of several words and one whole word obviously carried down from a line above. The word read “scilens” or “scileus.” Possibly other persons had examined it that morning. If so, those who did not know Latin no doubt thought it Latin, and those who knew Latin no doubt thought it dog-Latin. Mr. Wile was better informed. He had for years studied Tudor handwriting. He was familiar with the *More* manuscript in the Museum and with the researches of Sir E. Maunde Thompson, Mr. Pollard and Mr. Dover Wilson. He had learned much from these scholars: “sic vos” (but this only in the *Times* and the *Morning Post*) “non vobis mellificatis apes.” And two pieces of knowledge of stupendous import leapt to his mind as he gazed at the word. The less significant was that Shake-

speare's "m's," "n's" and "u's" were always indistinguishable; the far more vital was that Shakespeare is the only man on record who is known to have spelt the word "silence" as "scilens." Thus does it appear in the "*More Addition*" and thus in Mr. Justice Silence's name in the quarto of *Henry IV, Part 2*. Staggered by his discovery, Mr. Wile (his furtive movements were conjecture since none had watched him) drew back the tough vellum and saw that the two preceding words were "rest is." "The rest is silence!" The climax of *Hamlet*! Mr. Wile dared not dislodge the whole cover, but peeping in he saw enough to convince him that many more lines, some freely corrected, were there, and what looked like the ends of three separate attempts by Shakespeare to write his own name, on the margin, to his satisfaction.

On this Mr. Wile boldly bid; he was sure of his ground. After the auction, in company with expert friends, he took the cover to pieces, and found three separate whole leaves, covered with writing, all from *Hamlet*, on both sides. Several valuable emendations of the text had already been secured. The note-book itself had been demonstrated beyond all dispute to have been kept by Shakespeare's wife.

"It is understood," concluded all the newspaper "stories," "that the manuscript will go

to America." They had no authority for this assertion, except the authority of common sense, which should perhaps count. At all events their predictions were accurate. Mr. Curtain made a pathetic attempt to secure the Greatest Manuscript Treasure in the World for the British Museum. Mackenzie held out firmly, much to Mr. Curtains' grief; the grief was intensified by the fact that Mr. Campbell, who had never enjoyed himself so much, openly encouraged Wile to hang on and get the most enormous price he could. "I'm extremely sorry," said Wile, "I should like the manuscript to go to the Museum and I shan't forget the service you did me before the sale; but I can't sacrifice what you ask me to sacrifice." For the British Government's final offer of purchase price (in the form of an advance on the Museum's whole book allowance for many years) was a beggarly hundred thousand pounds. And when this offer, which nearly drove half the officials in the Treasury to suicide, was made, Mackenzie already had in his hands eight telegrams from the United States, each offering half a million.

The chaffering was conducted in full view of the whole world; Mr. Campbell liked it so, and Mackenzie, of whom his old self had been but an irresolute shadow, did not mind. At one million five hundred thousand six of

the competitors had dropped out. Two remained. One was Mr. Thaddeus Harrison, the great New York financier, who for many years has been gathering together a library which he intends to bequeath to his old University at Troy, N. Y.; the other, less celebrated but rumoured prodigiously rich, was Mr. Paul Jones, of Florida, whose meteoric rise to wealth as a merchant prince in Nassau, the Bahamas, has received less than its due meed of attention. For five days these two in America and our two friends in England virtually lived in the cable offices. Special editions of the evening papers came out as each new bid was received. At first they crept up cautiously by hundred thousands at a time. "Harrison offers two millions," ran the poster for one edition; "£2,100,000 from Jones" ran the next. Then the pace of the offers was accelerated. At five millions there was some hesitation; at six both competitors seemed to have got new breath. Finally, when both had simultaneously cabled bids of twelve million pounds, the limit seemed to have been reached. "Can't do it," was Mr. Jones's last message in reply to a polite suggestion of a rise; and Mr. Harrison was equally clear with "Not another cent."

"What shall I do now?" Wile asked his bearded mentor.

"Well, you will be pretty comfortable with the sum," said Mr. Campbell, "and the only thing you can do now is to close with the man who will pay quickest." Another frenzied exchange of messages occurred, and in the end Mr. Harrison, with six millions down and another six in a month, was proclaimed the victor.

Mackenzie Wile, at the suggestion of his friend, handsomely chartered at his own cost a Cunard liner to take the manuscript across the Atlantic. As well he did, for Mr. Harrison could now barely have paid a first-class return fare. He had to sell all his steel, all his shipping, all his rails, all his beef. The result in Wall Street was the worst panic of modern times. Crash after crash came; every kind of new issue had to be suspended; and from Oregon to Maine the little punters were ruined in tens of thousands.

"I think," said Mr. Campbell to Mr. Wile, "you had better start buying in New York for all you're worth." He did; and we may yet live to see him offered the throne of Greece.

V: BAXTERIANA

I

MRS. HAWKE and her daughter Albinia amused themselves in their own way. They liked theatres, dances and supper-parties: Albinia, at her usually early and hasty dinner, babbled to Dad about hotels he had never entered and young men he had never seen: the family were on perfect terms, and neither his wife nor his daughter had ever asked Eustace Hawke to go to a dance. No: he would kiss them both, help them on with their wraps, give them his blessing as they scuttled out to the car, and then he would retire to the top of the house. There was his study, quiet, secluded, warm, with regiments of books, a comfortable armchair, a reading lamp, a box of cigars and a jolly log-fire. And there, the day's work at his chambers put clean out of mind, he would settle down to his literary hobbies.

The chief of these was the life and works of Richard Baxter; and there was certainly nothing abnormal in that. Thousands of others shared it, lawyers, doctors, parsons, literary men, tradesmen, wherever the Eng-

lish language was spoken: and the fact that it gave him a masonic connection with so large and widespread a community was to Hawke one of its incidental charms. He liked the monthly dinners of the Baxter Club, the annual pilgrimages to Baxter's birthplace, the quotations from Baxter that he heard on the lips of politicians and other commonplace people. He enjoyed the little monographs on aspects of Baxter, Baxter's residences and travels, Baxter's bibliography, Baxter at Cambridge, Baxter's friends, which were continually peeping out from the Press in England and America. He liked contributing occasionally to the odd little periodical called *Baxteriana* which an enthusiast at Nottingham conducted, and he liked getting letters about his contributions. Grubbing for unimportant and unprofitable facts in a great writer's life was a relaxation after the hard and uncongenial work of the day, and miscellaneous reading was all the more amusing when anything he encountered, event or opinion, might be related to the one great theme of his hero.

For, though Hawke was always reticent about his deepest thoughts, Baxter certainly was his hero. His interest in Baxter was more than that of a mere collector or critic; his hobby-horse was more than a toy. Like many men externally dry and worldly-wise,

he had a deep faculty for reverence, and he revered the memory of Robert Baxter. To him Baxter was not merely a great man and a great writer, but a teacher whose sagacity never failed and a character the fine rectitude of whose responses could never be questioned. Though Baxter had died before Hawke was born, he felt that he knew and loved him better than any human being. He expanded and mellowed in the society of his Baxterian cronies, for he knew that they shared his feelings. Often, when he was sitting by himself, some phrase in Baxter's essays or letters, humorous and humane, or magnificently resolute in its clear morality, would make him rest his book on his knee, and stare with a rapt expression into the fire. He was thus engaged, one foggy evening in November, when there came a knock at the door. "Damn!" he said under his breath; but aloud, "Come in!"

The parlourmaid entered. "Mr. Atkins is below, sir, and would like to see you."

"Why on earth didn't you bring him up?" asked Mr. Hawke, a little roughly.

Edith flushed: "I told him I would see if you were in, sir," she said.

"I'm sorry, Edith," said Mr. Hawke. "Quite right. Bring him up."

Mr. Hawke glanced at the whisky tray and resigned himself to a spoiled evening.

Atkins was, no doubt, the son of an old friend, and he wished him well at the Bar. It was also true that he had told the boy to come in whenever he liked in the evenings; but why would people take polite remarks so literally? Three visits in three months was absurdly excessive on the part of a youth who had nothing in common with him, and who did not even seem to enjoy himself when he came. Footsteps approached up the stairs. A knock. "Mr. Atkins." There stood that superior and not very able young man, with his smooth fair hair, his small fair moustache, his expression, half sulky, half supercilious. "Come in, Atkins," said the host, "I'd been hoping you might drop in."

Mr. Atkins condescended to a whisky. Once more it was not clear why he had come, though he surely must like to come; once more Mr. Hawke took pains to make him talk. He asked him about his work; he had got one or two small cases on circuit, but his hopes, fears and ambitions were unfathomable. Questions about his family educed the usual answer: "Oh, they're all right as far as I know." Questions of the gossip kind about people elicited two kinds of answer. If he knew the person mentioned, he said, "Oh, yes, I know him," as though that dealt with that. If he did not know the person, he

said, "No, I don't know him," thereby dismissing the person, possibly very eminent and old enough to be his grandfather, into some limbo of insignificant shades. "He is my guest," reflected Mr. Hawke, after he had had once more to abandon the kindly hypothesis that Mr. Atkins was shy in the presence of an older man.

It was now late in the evening, and Mr. Hawke had begun to hope that his young exquisite was about to go, when Mr. Atkins saw fit to notice the book which his host had laid open, face downwards, on the little table between them. "Ah, Baxter," he remarked, with a slight lift of the eyebrows, "a nice lot he was."

"He happens to be my favourite author," replied Mr. Hawke, with some coldness, very deliberately knocking a long ash from his cigar.

"A pleasant customer, all the same," said Mr. Atkins. "Perhaps you haven't seen those letters?"

"I think," said Mr. Hawke stiffly, "that I have read every letter of his that has ever been printed."

"Oh, I don't think the ones I mean will be printed," said Atkins, with a wintry smile. "There might," he remarked, with a faint titter, "be trouble with the police."

Mr. Hawke sprang round in his chair:

"What the devil do you mean by it?" he said angrily.

The young man appeared a little alarmed. "I didn't mean to shock you, sir," he said, dropping his affectation of impassivity, "but I didn't know you would take it so seriously. I didn't suppose you'd know really. It's only a week or two ago that Bertie Fynes got hold of them."

"Them? What?"

"The letters," said the youth, a little pleased at the sensation he had made, though surprised at its nature. He relapsed into his own phraseology. "Thick isn't the word for them. I've never seen anything like them. What an old hypocrite!"

Hawke rose to his feet, suppressing his heat with difficulty. He stood with his back to the fire and looked sternly down at his guest. "I suppose you are hardly to be expected to know," he said, "that you are defaming the memory of one of the noblest of men, and I won't suggest that you are consciously telling a revolting falsehood. I can only presume that Fynes has imposed on you with a disgusting practical joke."

Atkins flushed, began a sentence angrily, checked himself, looked at his feet and said, surlily: "How did I know you were going to take it like this? Anyhow I've seen the letters."

"I didn't say you hadn't seen something," retorted Hawke, "you've seen some filthy forgeries or other. I can't think Fynes doesn't know better, even if you don't. It's simply appalling when men of his standing lend themselves to things of this sort. I won't hear another word about it."

Atkins' mouth curled for an instant in an obstinate smile. He controlled himself. "I'm sorry," he said, "let's change the subject. May I help myself to another drink?"

Hawke nodded coldly. Then he too pulled himself together and resumed polite conversation. In another ten minutes the young man, with an exaggerated surprise as his eye caught the clock, professed an urgent obligation to go, and went.

II

Hawke's anger simmered down. He told himself to forget the episode. It took all sorts to make a world; fools like Atkins and insensitives like Fynes; no great man's reputation had escaped foul aspersions from his degraded inferiors, and even Baxter, unsullied though his memory had for so long apparently been, could not hope to escape the general fate. He invited such attack less than most eminent men; his honesty was so evident, his noblest words and acts were

expressed with such humour and humility, he was so manly, so hearty, so sociable, so tolerant to weaknesses that he did not share, that the most vicious and jealous had been constrained to let him alone. He could not be expected to escape altogether, but slander against Baxter bore its own contradiction on the face of it, and the best thing his devotees could do was to let it alone, dismissing it with the brief frank contemptuous description that would have contented Baxter himself had he heard it. His whole life was on record in Pickersgill's great biography, a life of public service, of innocent private enjoyment, of deep spiritual experience, in which for months at a time every hour of the great humanist's waking existence could be counted and shared. The aspersion was as absurd as it was monstrous; whatever record came to light Baxter could never be shamed. A vision of the rugged, kindly old face, so familiar in a hundred portraits, came back to Hawke, as he mused by his dying fire. Yes, it was preposterous. If Fynes was hardly capable of so vile a fraud himself, he must have a morbid side to him, hitherto unsuspected, which, in this regard, had betrayed him into a gullibility equally uncharacteristic of him. Some low creature had imposed on him with a forgery for the sake of getting money out of him. Hawke

went to bed; the family would come in later. Several times that night he woke up.

III

Yet Fynes was an intelligent, an unusually acute, man; a man less likely than most to be taken in, as shrewd as he was self-controlled. The thought kept on recurring to Mr. Hawke during the few days that followed Atkins' call. He would impatiently thrust it aside and then it would return, like a creeping spider that a man brushes off his clothes. When he was hard at work in his chambers, in pauses of the conversation at family meals, in bed especially when all was quiet except for the passing cabs: it returned again and again, with unpleasant insistence. In the daytime it was comparatively easy to deal with; it could be ignored. At night, when the imagination will pursue strange paths and almost any wild horror seems possible in a universe so vague and so dark, it would not be driven away. The first time that an inner voice whispered to Mr. Hawke: "Suppose it is all true?" his flesh crept, his hair tingled, and he reproached himself in an agony of shame. The voice came again and again, insinuating like the serpent in the garden, extending the sphere of its corruption like the maggot in the apple, until he

had become so accustomed to it that he began to reflect upon its argument, each time going farther and farther before abusing himself as a beast and roughly pushing his thoughts away. Suppose it was all true? Might it not be all true? Had not every man's nature unexplored depths? Was any man's life really known to his fellows? Had we not all things to hide? Wasn't it possible that every one of the friends whom he most admired led a secret life which was concealed beneath an open countenance and a façade of morality and good works? Could he swear that in any single case there was no furtive indulgence which would horrify the world if exposed, that in any cupboard there was no skeleton? Were not men such enigmas that anything might be true about them? had he not heard hushed-up stories about some of the most reputable? Might there not be reserves behind the confessions of even the most candid of them, a St. Augustine or a Rousseau, depths beyond depths? Was not the brute in every man tugging at the chain? Who could promise that it should never break its bars, never escape for some terrible excursion? Again and again the questions returned. He had thought he knew everything there was to be known about Baxter; he would have gone bail for Baxter even had every other

"worthy" on the roll come to the test and failed. Yet could he be sure? Baxter might have gone through seventy years of life concealing the evil side of his nature; many of his moods of depression might be traceable to that, much of his confident judgment of others to a perverted desire to compensate in a way, for his own derelictions. Suppose he were bad all through; that all his tolerance of the sinner as well as all his intolerance of the sin was the fruit of a devilish irony which none had ever penetrated, a sustained mocking joke which he never allowed any one to share! Hawke's mind groped through endless dank corridors full of bats and crawling things; then retreated in horror at its own ill pursuits. One page from Baxter's essays, one sentence from his recorded conversation, one recollection of the eyes and voice and gestures that were as familiar as those of a living friend, and the thing seemed impossible again.

Hawke grew more and more unhappy. His life was poisoned. He cursed Atkins for breaking in on his peace; he cursed Fynes for a gloating fiend; he cursed himself for a vacillating traitor. Yet no sooner had he called himself a traitor than the quiet voice resumed its acid argument: "No, not a traitor, a coward. You think it may be true, and you won't face it." He would reply

that the mere assent to an investigation of so foul a charge was treachery to his hero's memory; Baxter himself would never have persuaded himself thus or wavered thus in an old allegiance. "Sophistry, sophistry," came the reply, reiterated until he had no longer the strength to resist it; "you know in your heart that you are deceiving yourself, that you are being a coward for comfort's sake."

About a week after the beginning of his trouble this word "comfort" came so clearly into his head that he could not help a grim smile. For if he was a coward for comfort's sake, it was a poor sort of comfort he was now enjoying. He was both miserable and restless. He could not work properly, read properly or sleep properly; he was brusque and distracted in conversation, and at home he was so grumpy that his wife and daughter became seriously concerned about him, and began pertinaciously to urge him, directly and by elaborate hints, to take a holiday, which increased his irritability. He answered them with transparent falsehoods: there was nothing wrong with him, there was nothing annoying him, a man might be allowed to think about his work, and so on. They could not drive him; but in the end he drove himself. He could stand this uncertainty no longer, an uncertainty which not

only ruined his work but robbed him of his recreation: for, since the fateful evening he had been hardly able to look at his bookshelves, much less settle down to his favourite reading. One morning, when the sun shone, he went to his study before leaving home and wrote to Fynes a letter which he sent off by hand, asking for an immediate reply, to his chambers. "I may not be in to dinner to-night; I have to see a man," he remarked to his wife as he left home.

"Do look after yourself, Eustace," she said impetuously; "I do wish you'd take things more easily. Anyhow, it'll be all right to-night. We're both going to Lady Fouracres'."

IV

"Dear Fynes," ran the letter, "I have just heard from Atkins that you possess a manuscript collection of Baxter's letters. The account Atkins gave me of them was so astonishing as to be incredible. I can only suppose that there is a mistake somewhere. I hope Atkins was not in error in telling me about them. But since he *has* told me, I feel that I must, if you will allow me, see them. I am, as you may know, a close student of Baxter's life and works; and I feel it is vital to me to clear up this most disquieting mys-

tery. I could come round to your flat to-night if you are free." The plunge had been taken; as he proceeded to the Temple Mr. Hawke was relieved, and relieved to find himself relieved. Reasoning had frequently failed him; something beyond reason now told him that he had done the right thing. For the first time for days he was able to work well and to eat a normal lunch. Fynes's answer came, "By all means." Mr. Hawke dined alone at Simpson's, in the agreeable calm of a man who has acted upon an irrevocable decision, burnt his boats and landed on a firm, although unknown, shore from which return is impossible. He walked along the Embankment to the flat in Westminster, and, as he walked up the steps of the Mansions, was ashamed to feel a thrill of excitement which conscience tried to quell with a desperate "No: this shameful thing is *not* true."

Fynes received him in his luxurious study-drawing-room, the abode of a bachelor with a taste for Chippendale, French classics, old morocco and limited editions. "Delighted to see you," he said, and proceeded at once, rather apologetically, to explain why he had never invited Hawke to see his Baxter treasures before. "Of course, I need scarcely say, Hawke, that in the ordinary way I should be only too charmed for you to see and make

use of anything I happen to have. But I couldn't help keeping these particular things dark. I'm not especially keen on blowing on people's reputations, and I don't especially enjoy hurting their admirers' feelings. I knew how devoted you were to Baxter, and I didn't want to upset you; besides these things, whoever had written them, would probably shock you. I, I am afraid, am rather case-hardened."

"That's all right," said Mr. Hawke, uneasily looking around, "I quite understand. And I hope you understand my motives in coming. The thing has got absurdly on my nerves and I simply must get rid of it." His loyalty and his desire that the solid ground should not fail beneath him were responsible for his next words. "I hope you won't mind my saying that I shall probably question their authenticity."

Fynes looked at him with eyes steady under their drooping lids, and mouth that tightened whimsically. "I doubt it," he said, "their pedigree is perfect." He walked to a corner by the door, knelt down, and began unlocking the lowest drawer of a dark mahogany cabinet. "I got them," he said, "from Brooks of Oxford Street. He doesn't usually deal in this sort of thing, but a great author is another matter. I take it you admit that Brooks is straight?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Hawke, gulping slightly, and feeling at once a little sick and a little excited now that he was right on the verge.

"Well, he gave his guarantee, and I've gone into it pretty carefully myself. It may be astonishing, but I can tell you it's all right." He rose with a portfolio, brought it over and put it on a small table in front of Hawke. Keeping his hand on the packet, he went on: "I need scarcely ask you whether you know Baxter's handwriting?"

Hawke looked him in the eyes with a spurious boldness. "I know it," he said, "as well as my own. I know the papers of the day and their water-marks, and I know something about inks. I know where Baxter was at almost any date in his life. I also claim to know something about all his friends."

"I don't think you know about this one," remarked Fynes with a cynical little laugh. "Look at them yourself, and take your time about it."

Mr. Hawke examined the letters. They were a revelation. There was no question here of mere exuberant animality or jocular coarseness. It was like looking into the Pit. . . .

v

He walked home. His world had been shattered. For the first few minutes the excitement of discovery had been so great that he had almost enjoyed himself. Even now at moments the savage in him was elated when the thought came, "What a secret! Imagine the sensation if one told the world to-morrow." By the time he reached his dark house the savage had savoured all he could of that imaginary thrill; there remained the civilised man ashamed at his own baseness, sorrow-stricken because of the destruction of his idol, unable to see how he would ever reconstruct a world to live in, in revolt against the meanness and squalor of the whole human race, willing to believe anything of anybody, hopeless, wretched past despair. He lay awake in anguish all that night, turning or still on his back, his eyes sometimes shut, sometimes deliberately open to the glimmering window as a partial refuge from the nightmare of his own thoughts. Now and then the face of Baxter came back to him: sometimes the old face unchanged, sometimes a mask distorted with villainy, sometimes a new image with reproach in its eyes, unjustly presenting itself considering what he had learned. Mr. Hawke thought of the collection of books in

the room across the landing; the docketed Baxterian references; the half-completed papers; the files of *Baxteriana*, repository of the eager and innocent recreations of so many harmless people—if indeed anybody was harmless. What a monstrous monument to hypocrisy they had all built up! How they had imposed on the world with their ideal pictures of this hideous creature! With what fatuity they had taken him for granted! With what ease he had swindled them all into thinking that all good causes would be helped if they discovered who his maternal great-grandparents were and in what hotel at Chichester he had stayed during his one brief visit there! The night seemed endless; when he rose at last in the cold dawn he was amazed at the face, drawn, white, hag-ridden, which confronted him in the glass. Daylight made things easier though; and after an early toast and coffee, he fled from the prospect of an inquisitive family, walked up Sloane Street to the Park, and with his overcoat well buttoned up, began to stroll up and down by the Serpentine. It was a crisis; what should he do? Was it his duty to explode the vast deceit of the Baxter legend or was it not? Should he be a party to a colossal lie? or should he precipitate an exposure which would destroy the pastime of thousands, the living even of

some, and be a powerful agent on behalf of a cynical and embittered philosophy of life? He had thought the crucial decision about duty had already been taken; but no, it was still in front of him. Through a thin mist a wintry sun touched with orange the sluggish ripples of the lake; a grey gull drifted to and fro; the solitude and quietness gradually assuaged his trouble and induced a certain resignation. Peace seemed worth having; even the illusion of stability better than a world all obvious quicksands. "Great is Truth and it shall prevail"; "Let justice be done if the Heavens fall"; with these two proverbs he had often fortified himself during a life of struggle, but this morning they had lost their force. He was fatigued; he envied those whose faith was undisturbed; "why trouble them?" he asked himself. And arguments came to reinforce his inclination. If Baxter's reputation was not a work of nature could it not be regarded as an ideal creation of Art? It expressed a dream of the race if not the achievement of Baxter. That figure, so loved and revered, had never lived in the world, but it had the existence of a grand statue, and to destroy it would be like shattering a statue to pieces because its lines had but a legendary basis. Why diminish the beauty in the world? or remove a consolatory lie that was only a

lie in a sense? The passers-by grew more numerous. Mr. Hawke did not wish to attract attention by parading longer in Napoleonic contemplation; he made a quick resolve, stepped out for Hyde Park Corner, took a cab to the Temple, and rang Fynes up. Fynes was still in, no doubt at a late breakfast. "I say, Fynes," said Mr. Hawke, "do you feel inclined to sell those letters?" He thought he heard a slight titter at the other end; it made him blush, but he was determined to see the thing through.

"Well," came the answer, "as a matter of fact, I had been thinking of it already. I've got an offer for them from America."

"We can't do it over the telephone," said Mr. Hawke resolutely; "I'll come along and see you at once." Then, without giving Fynes time to say that he was going out, he rang off. He called a cab in the Strand, and set off again for the scene of his last night's ordeal.

His mind was made up. He could not bear that the scoffers of the world should rejoice to find that Baxter also had disgraced himself. "Hypocrisy," he remembered, "is the tribute that vice pays to virtue." After all, it showed the superiority of virtue, and any tribute was better than none; why, he thought, with a wistful smile, should he intercept Baxter's tribute, if that only meant

a score for unashamed and unmitigated vice? Arrived at the flat, he found on Fynes's face an expression of friendly interest.

"Do you want these letters very badly, Hawke?" he asked, "for, if so, I'm afraid you'll have to pay through the nose for them."

"I will pay anything within reason," said Hawke; and at the other man's cold chaffering he found reviving within himself something of his old affection for Baxter, a desire to protect him maternally against a cruel sardonic world.

"I've been offered a very large sum by an American," continued Fynes. "He wants them purely as a collector. I don't know what your interest in them may be, but if, as I suspect, you want to suppress them, you've got to go rather a long way."

"To be frank, I do want to suppress them," said Hawke; "I think they are abominable and ought to be suppressed. Can't you see that?"

"Oh, yes, I can see it," said Fynes, "and it may comfort you to know that my American is the last man in the world to publish them. Half his pleasure would vanish if he hadn't got the things to himself. He has offered me four thousand pounds for them: I need money, and it means a lot to me."

Hawke was dazed. Four thousand

pounds! He began to confess inability to compete and then his gorge rose. What guarantee was there that the letters would not be vulgarly exploited? Ought not a self-respecting man to make any sacrifice rather than be beaten in a matter of this kind? Wouldn't Baxter himself want him to have the courage of his convictions? he reflected automatically; then pulled himself together with the reminder that Baxter was a blackguard and a humbug. Four thousand pounds, though he made a good income, was half his savings; and he was a prudent man. But he suddenly saw red; he simply had to act; and, rather hoarsely, but still quietly, he said, "I'll give you five thousand if you'll hand over the manuscripts now."

"That's good enough for me," said Fynes.

Mr. Hawke did not go back to his chambers. He went to his house and there he went to his study; the fire was not lit, but he lit it and nursed it to a blaze. He then opened his parcel and, without looking again at its contents, put them one by one on the flames and watched them shrivel. As the last curled up and calcined his heart lightened, and he sighed: he was burning letters of Baxter's, and it was impossible for the old love to be entirely uprooted. He fought down his pangs, turned, and looked at his shelves with alien eyes.

VI

Rumours got about; they were indignantly repudiated by Baxter's champions; there was no evidence, and Baxter stands as high as ever he did. Mr. Hawke, however, found his occupation gone. He could pity Baxter now; he was not merely disgusted with him. But he committed his unfinished researches to the flames and he resigned his membership of the Baxter Society, without giving any explanation. They implored him to remain on if only as an honorary member; he weakened and assented. But nothing could revive his former enthusiasm; nobody else could minister to his tastes as Baxter had ministered to them; he avoided Baxterians and he found himself disinclined for any new literary hobby. The result was that one morning he suddenly announced to his wife and daughter that he would like to join them at the evening's dance if they didn't mind.

They were overjoyed. So it is an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

VI: THE LECTURE

I

SUCCESS may make a man, in some degree, fat and complacent. Much public speaking may make him, often unconsciously, hypocritical, a fisher for laughs and cheers, a formulator of statements which he may once have thought to be true, but which in the end he makes without considering whether they are true or false. Literary artists and politicians are extremely liable to both dangers, and three young men, assembled in the quiet American bar of Basano's noisy restaurant, were agreed that both had enveloped Alfred Winter. They were all reviewers, and all trying to write, which is another matter. They were all keen and, naturally, lean; and they were bound to confess that Winter was getting fat, that his work was deteriorating, and that he was rapidly becoming a systematic humbug.

"Bound to confess" was the phrase; but they made the confession with varying measures of reluctance. If John Bateson was even a little reluctant, the fact was not evident. He was of the fierce and uncomprom-

mising sort—as indeed Winter himself had been in early youth—and would listen to no defence. He shook his black hair and scowled at his tumbler: “He’s a rotter,” he remarked, “and you both know it. If the truth’s to be told, I don’t suppose even his early stuff was as good as we used to think it. Anyhow he’s sold himself. And,” he added, with an intonation of deep contempt, “he’s got the price.”

“We could do with some of it,” sighed Hugh Macintosh, “but I’m afraid it’s true. It’s an awful pity; he might have been a greater man than you think, Bateson. He’s certainly gone west now. It’s almost incredible that a few years ago we all of us took his opinion for gospel.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Bateson, bluntly, turning his dark, strong face to the speaker, “I didn’t. I could always see the man would go the way of all charlatans.”

The third was a young man with pince-nez, a sensitive thin face, innocent blue eyes and mouse-coloured hair. He had been thoughtfully leaning on the bar and kicking the brass footrail, and he now looked up, framing his lips for a protest.

“I suppose you’re going to defend him, Emery,” said Bateson.

“You’re so extreme,” said Emery. “It’s really too absurd to say that he’s never done

good work, or that he doesn't write well even now. I admit he's a bit thin nowadays, and tries to go for a bigger public than the Lord meant him for; and I'm afraid he's lost his sense of humour about himself. But I'm sure he doesn't know he's a charlatan."

"Which he is," said Bateson. "Did you ever hear one of his precious lectures?"

"Oh, of course I have, but you will be so unfair. Anyhow I'm off. I said I'd have an early tea with him this afternoon."

"Take care," laughed Macintosh, "or you'll be becoming a little humbug too."

II

The conversation had meant more to Adrian Emery than to the others, who, by the time that he had walked the hundred yards to Charing Cross, were probably disputing about something else. Winter's figure as he had first known it hovered before his eyes as he made his way through the traffic towards Piccadilly. Six years ago Winter had only been a celebrity of sorts, not an oracle revered by all the half-read people in the country. He was a charming figure then, hearty and gay, with his clear, twinkling eyes, quick laugh, and delightful habit of equal conversation with the humblest and youngest. Slightly unconven-

tional, too; an "extremist" rather feared and frowned upon by the elderly and respectable. His loose tweed suit, pink tie and wide soft hat were worn as though he liked them, and had forgotten he had them on; he was natural, free of speech, witty and daring, at the same time sensible. Then he had found, by imperceptible degrees, a market for his wit and sense and, in restricted quantities, his audacity. It had been a rapid progress: first dramatic criticism, then criticism of pictures, then two picaresque books, half story, half amusing commentary on modern thought and life, and then a successful play. The play, which had a setting of international politics, was a great success. To his old associates it was the beginning of the end; to his new the end of the beginning. He had arrived: and in two years no Academy banquet was complete without him. Insensibly, as it seemed to Emery, who had a year or two back seen him almost daily, he had got softer, more easily satisfied both with himself and with things in general. There was a Winter legend: he did his best to live up to it, and found it no difficult task. He had begun to be applauded as a constructive critic of modern life: the applause gave him a keener taste for construction: and apparently the vaguer and more platitudinous he became the heartier was the response from the pub-

lic. To-day in any town in England might have been found half-a-dozen persons willing to lecture on the work and influence of Alfred Winter, and any of them with such a subject might count on an audience: he was indubitably superior yet comprehensible to all. All this, as Adrian Emery walked to Winter's club, he recalled and faced more frankly than he would ever consent to do in conversation. He contemplated, also, certain other disagreeable symptoms: the element of dandyism which had crept into Winter's *négligé*, his fondness for dropping out, as it were by accident, information about invitations he had received, causes that had welcomed his assistance, and prices he had been offered by obsequious managers and magazines. Winter even, Emery thought with a blush, showed signs of a still unworthier form of vanity, nonchalantly parading his eminent acquaintances, referring to venerable mandarins of literature, politics and society as Dick and Arthur. It was a dreadful pity, in spite of Bateson. Emery was convinced that a very good man was going wrong.

He made his resolution. The truth was becoming too widely realised in the only quarters that mattered. Young as he was, and obscure, he would do a friend's unpleasant duty even at the risk of a breach. He

must let Winter know, delicately or brutally, what was happening to him, what his friends feared and what delighted his enemies.

It took an effort, but he did it. Winter began by arguing: he put up a case for the interviews and the films, and hotly denied that his writing had grown more slipshod. "As for these lectures," said Emery, "why on earth do it? You cannot possibly put your best into them. They are all just vague uplift."

Winter did not deign to reply. The words stung. The parting was strained. "I have a big lecture on at Mulcaster to-night," said Winter, coldly.

"What's the subject?" asked the distressed Emery, trying to pretend that things were the same as they had been.

"Oh, something or other about Art. Good-bye."

III

The city of Mulcaster is one of the largest in North Central England. It boasts, literally if inexplicably, a large number of warehouses, cobblestones, trams and inhabitants, and it rather piques itself on its ability to show London how to do things. The expresses take three hours to get there from whichever of several stations you choose; the

first-class carriages are very comfortable, and an early dinner may always be obtained on board. Alfred Winter secured a carriage to himself, tipped the attendant to bring him a tumbler and a water-bottle, produced a silver whisky flask, a writing-block and a fountain pen from the pockets of his heavy fur coat, hung up the coat and put up his feet, and prepared to meditate on his oration for the evening. He had done this sort of thing often enough; there was an hour and a half before the first dinner, and there would be a short time afterwards. He had no need to bother about changing, as the tweeds and the pink tie, though they might have been resented on any one else, were too generally regarded as a necessary part of his literary and ethical equipment to be abandoned in favour of evening dress. Plenty of time. And anyhow what did it matter? In earlier days he had felt nervous without full notes and was sometimes ineffective even with them. But he knew now his gifts of improvisation, and memory disguised as improvisation; he knew his audiences; and he knew, to-night as most nights, his theme. He had lectured in Wales, Devonshire, Birmingham, Yorkshire, London, Oxford, Cambridge and more places than he could remember on "The Primary Function of Art." In the quite old days, when subur-

ban and college literary societies provided him with the best platforms he could get, he had frequently read papers on that subject, and the lecture had developed with time, as also had his lecture on "The Place of Fiction in the Modern State," and that on "The Drama." He still liked, if he was not too tired or lazy, to devote a little thought to his subject before speaking, and to make a few notes, new if on the old lines. But even these were not, at a pinch, necessary. Some of the argument might be missing, some of the chief points lost; but he never failed, he knew, to remember enough of the more elevated passages and the more successful quotations and the more successful impertinences to carry him through. There were even, ready to leap into the breach at need, a number of trained veteran jokes which could always be relied on to cover a temporary breakdown in the main movement, and turn failure into success; he had learned the whole art of speaking slowly and with great emphasis whilst he was trying to think of the next thing he ought to say; he knew that with the lights around, the table at his hand, rows of eager faces in front of him, and the stimulating sounds of applause in his ears, he could always rely on himself to produce the requisite amount of words and gestures, however bored and

empty he may have felt right up to the end of the chairman's inane introductory eulogy. So, leisurely sipping and not very much concerned, he settled down with his white paper and his pen.

He made a few idle marks; then he looked out of the window for a while at the autumn landscape, soft under a dove-coloured sky; then he fell to drawing vague faces on his paper. "Why on earth do I do it?" he muttered to himself as he mixed a stiff whisky; "Oh damn!" he exclaimed five minutes later, as he mixed another. "This'll be the last anyhow," he concluded with resolution, and fell so grimly to the making of notes that he took no notice of the summons to dinner, the falling of twilight, the turning on of the lights. The train groaned and stopped: "Harley," a dim station, rattling cans, rain flicking the window in front of a melancholy lamp. It was the last stop before Mulcaster. He looked through his notes again, and then deliberately tore them up into small pieces and scattered them on the floor. "I shan't need them," he said, listening to his own voice loud above the rattling of the wheels, "I'm in the mood. I'd better let it come as it will." The rattling became violent, stations flew by in rapid sequence, then there was a slowing down and a grating: lights, a broad hall, the

white steaming of many engines, voices, a row of porters, the stop. He got out with his bag, and two men in glistening wet overcoats ran up and pressed him by the hand.

IV

They were the President and Secretary of the Federation of Literary Societies which had organised the meeting; damp but eager both. The President, Mr. Maxwell, was head of a secondary school; he wore spectacles, a drooping moustache and a soft hat. He was introduced by the Secretary, Mr. Archibald Jump, with whom Winter had corresponded; Mr. Jump wore a bowler, and had a clean-shaven intelligent face and an anxious smile. They fought politely for Winter's bag, and hurried him down the misty platform, singing in antiphony.

"I hope you had a good journey, Mr. Winter."

"This is a great pleasure."

"We have all been looking forward to it."

"It's a wet night, but they'll turn out for *you*."

"We've had to get the Central Hall; St. Andrew's wasn't big enough."

"The Lord Mayor is going to take the chair."

"How you scored over Gilbert Hughes in

that letter. We all laughed about it here."

"I have every book you have written, Mr. Winter."

"We had Mr. Hughes here in the spring. He didn't go down well with our people."

"What do you think of George Hawshaw's new novel?"

"Many of our teachers are using your last book in the schools."

"You will have a great many of the teachers there to-night."

"I think you know Mrs. Jones of Wigan. She asked me to tell you how sorry she was that she wouldn't be able to get over for your lecture."

But, as Winter grunted or made no reply, the enthusiasm diminished, the song died away. They courteously put him in a cab, and did their best with an occasional timid sentence in the darkness. Winter was moody, answered abruptly, and gazed out of the window at the lamp-lit mist and the passing vehicles, Moody; well, it was hardly strong enough. Great writers are pardonably eccentric, but this was over the border. The same thoughts coiled out of the minds of both the worthy officials. Winter was worse than moody; he seemed a little mad, and he—well, he had been drinking.

A gloomy journey, but they turned into a Square, and there were the broad steps of

the Hall and people swarming up them. Mr. Maxwell, Mr. Jump, and Winter with them, went round through a side door and found the Lord Mayor, eight o'clock having struck, in a dismal little waiting-room, chafing at their delay. Introductions were hurried through; a corridor was traversed; and the four of them broke upon the platform of a vast hall, crowded floor and gallery. The Lord Mayor took the central seat, Alfred Winter sat, still looking very sombre, on his right, and the President and Secretary, uncomfortable in so public a position, endeavoured to be unobtrusive on chairs to the extreme right and left of this central group. The Lord Mayor rose. He hemmed. He spoke of the distinguished visitor. He hemmed again. He spoke of Art. He hemmed again. He spoke, amid general applause, of the progressive spirit of Mulcaster, and hemmed for the last time. He then called upon Mr. Alfred Winter, the distinguished dramatist, critic and publicist, to deliver the address to which they had all so eagerly been looking forward.

Winter looked at his feet, rose with a menacing air, walked past the reading desk that had been prepared for him, and put one hand ferociously in his pocket. There he stood, the figure already well known in caricature. The crowd was thrilled and hushed, but Mr.

Maxwell and Mr. Jump felt ill at ease, they knew not why. He began to speak. "My Lord Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, "I fear that my address to-night will not be precisely what you expect, but it may be" (he could not get rid of his fluency) "that some, at least, of you will think that I was wise in diverging a little from the theme to which I am nominally to devote myself." There was a rustle. The Lord Mayor looked intelligently around and then smirked at his hands. Mulcaster was to get something out of the ordinary, an honour which, after all, was only her due. The whole audience was agog. This was one of Winter's characteristic surprises. He was living up to his reputation.

"We are assembled to-night," said Winter, in a clear but slightly harsh voice, "to consider the subject of the Primary Functions of Art. It sounds very important. There has just been an earthquake in China in which 100,000 people have perished, of whom a half were roasted to death. We are considering the Primary Functions of Art. There seems to be a chance of another great European War. We are considering the Primary Functions of Art. In this city, as in others, there are at this moment multitudes of people, men and women, who are desperate through poverty, sweated and unem-

ployed. We are considering the Primary Functions of Art. We have all had a good meal, and we can forget these things for a while. We know they exist; but we find the Primary Functions of Art more amusing. Platitudes about Art are more amusing; and I freely admit that I could provide you with them as I have provided many audiences before." Expectancy was on tip-toe. Winter was in one of his bold moods. They were to have him at his best.

"Well," he went on, "you are not to take me as underrating the importance of Art. I have talked a good deal of well-fed cant about it in my time. I began by meaning what I said; and I am honestly convinced that much that I said, though I do not claim that it was new, was right. Art is important, it is symptomatic, and a civilisation which does not live by it is doomed. But it must be at least five years since I gave a minute's hard thought to that or any other subject; one can get along with cheap substitutes for thought just as well. I have been a popular humbug, as most so-called thinkers and leaders of opinion are, particularly if they habitually lecture."

It was a startling opening. Even Winter, whose wisdom was usually so delightfully mixed with whimsicality, was not expected to go quite so far. The hall, packed with

people, was absolutely silent, except for a few slight laughs which were angrily hushed. The Lord Mayor looked fogged and inclined to sleep, anxiety was written on the features of Mr. Maxwell, Mr. Jump wondered if and how Winter would ever extricate himself from such a beginning. Smiles could be seen here and there on the faces of a few flippant who enjoyed any kind of surprise; Winter, who usually felt his audiences very surely and was very clever with them, seemed to make no endeavour to keep in touch. There was a lady in the front row, beaming with delight; the more he scowled, the more she beamed. Perhaps she had heard truth for the first time in her life, had relished it, and had suddenly acquired a morbid passion for more. Such a face, on another occasion, might have attracted Winter's gaze; on this he merely loured stubbornly out towards the body of the hall, his head and arms as nearly motionless as was compatible with loud and determined speech.

"For what," he went on, "is this sort of lecture? There may be something to be said for informative lectures or acknowledged 'turns' by Polar explorers, astronomers and honest professional entertainers. You don't learn as much from the best of them as you might from an hour's reading, but if you are too lazy to read you may learn some-

thing from such lectures; and anyhow you may regard them as a legitimate amusement. But my sort of lecture is different. I don't come here with facts and I don't admit to be merely selling my personality. I am supposed to be a missionary with a high calling. I desire to throw light for you on the highest aspects of life, and you are craving for what I can give you. I have, it is supposed, come among you for the mission's sake, in order that you might share the enjoyments, spiritual and æsthetic, that I have, in order that others may perceive certain moral issues as clearly as I do myself. I may tell you that that assumption, which it is usual for both parties on these occasions to make, is an absolute lie!"

There was a loud indignant murmur, which completely overbore the giggles. Mr. Jump stared feverishly at Mr. Maxwell. Mr. Maxwell made a movement and then checked himself. The Lord Mayor looked startled. Winter assumed a commanding attitude, and the audience, not wishing to be precipitate, relapsed into quietude. "I am speaking," he said, "for myself alone, though I fear that everything I say applies to many besides myself. I am not suggesting that all such lecturers are humbugs, though most of them are certainly wasting their time while they are on the platform, especially if they

speak from notes or impromptu. The solemnity of Ruskin, the simple-minded enthusiasm of William Morris, were probably not assumed, though they undoubtedly said all they had to say more effectively in print than in public speech. But so far as I myself am concerned I may say that I simply don't know why I have come here to-night."

A faint hope dawned in the breast of Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Jump, who sat nervously stroking their chins; there was a rustling of whispers in the audience as those who knew all about Winter's cleverness told their puzzled friends to wait and see what would come next. Slowly and resonantly he went on again. "I do not honestly know," he said in tones that rang clearly to the back of the far high gallery, "why I have come to Mulcaster, and this audience to-night. I knew well—or rather I thought I knew—when I left London this afternoon, what I was going to do when I got here. I knew I should be welcomed by an eager crowd of people; and I intended to give them such a lecture, indeed the very same lecture, as I had often delivered to such crowds before. There was a certain, not at all original, skeleton argument which may be found in many men's books, and which I daresay is as good as most arguments. There was a certain amount of illustration, a good deal of picturesque pad-

ding, certain jokes that I have frequently (always with apparent spontaneity) made, and a rather poignant peroration which I could, if supported, deliver on my head, or, if hypnotised, in my sleep. I should have appeared earnest, but I should have been cold-bloodedly acting; I should have appeared spontaneous, but I should have been performing psychological experiments that I knew by heart, treating you, quite rightly, as the precise replica of a hundred other easily handled crowds." They murmured again. "But why," he proceeded, "did I come? It wasn't, certainly, from sheer devotion to your welfare. I wish you well, but I would not put myself out for you. I may often appear good-humoured and kindly, but I am really thoroughly selfish; and at this moment I might be sitting comfortably in my house enjoying good company or writing something very lucrative, instead of standing on a platform in an ugly industrial town to which I said I would come to deliver a lecture on the Function of Art. Why did I come then?"

Loud cries of "Yes, why?" came from the gallery, and in two places in the hall scuffles broke out which caused widespread commotions. Sporadic shouts of "Sit down!" "Shut up!" "Go back to your home!" "Disgraceful!" were audible, and a man

with an umbrella began approaching the platform up the central passage between the seats. The Lord Mayor, proud of his famous talent for keeping meetings in hand, rose and beat with his fist on the table. The water-glass fell off; there was an involuntary laugh; order was restored. "I must beg you," said the Lord Mayor, "ladies and gentlemen, to hear Mr. Winter out. Some of you may feel, perhaps justly, that he has been unnecessarily provocative. But we must remember that he is our visitor, and that there are those who have paid for their seats and who desire to hear what further Mr. Winter may have to say."

Winter glanced casually at the Lord Mayor, and went calmly on. "It certainly wasn't the money that attracted me," he observed.

"Didn't you get enough?" cried a voice from the renewed hubbub.

"Yes," said Winter, "do not misunderstand me. I do not remember precisely what sum Mr. Jump offered me; no, to be honest, I remember perfectly well. It was twenty-five guineas."

"You ought to pay it back," shouted the voice, amid cheers from the back, whilst the front rows and the Lord Mayor looked uncomfortable at this bickering about filthy lucre.

"It is, I must add," the lecturer proceeded, "a very handsome fee for this sort of thing. Often enough quite eminent men are asked to come and do this sort of thing for ten or fifteen guineas and their railway fares, and many of them find that it pays them to do it at that. A few years ago I myself would have jumped at an offer of even five guineas, thought I should have accepted the engagement with apparent reluctance and difficulty. Twenty-five guineas would have seemed a tempting sum to me, and I daresay it still does to many of you. Some of you no doubt could spare the whole amount as easily as you have spared the amount of your seats this evening; but others probably have to count every shilling, and cannot but envy people who are paid so many pounds for an hour's apparently easy speechmaking. But it isn't now a large sum to me; I have plenty of money, and can make it with very much less effort and discomfort than this kind of excursion involves. What was it then? Was it mere weakness? Inability to say 'No'? I have tried to convince myself that it was that, but I fear I was trying to let myself off on the score of an amiable weakness. Was it that I enjoy public speaking? Sometimes, after I have started, and when the audience is responding well, I do; often I do not, and in anticipation the thing is

always a bore and a burden. Was it my vanity then? In some obscure way I think it was. . . .”

He elaborated the argument with painful realism, and the waters of discontent swelled again. Again the Lord Mayor, red and furious, had to rise to secure him a hearing. “We shall all, I think,” he shouted, “be relieved when Mr. Winter finds it convenient to bring his surprising remarks to a close, and I trust he will be short, but I must again beg you not to reduce the proceedings to a confusion which will not reflect credit on Mulcaster.”

“I shall not,” said Winter, his face still perfectly impassive, “detain you much longer, but there is one last aspect of the matter on which I feel obliged to say a few words. I have analysed my own motives for coming here, but what were yours? Mixed, of course, as you yourselves are mixed. Some of you, including probably the two gentlemen behind me, are poor and earnest students who spend all they can on books, and felt in coming here that they could learn something from me and be uplifted by contact with an inspiring personality.”

“Boo!” came a loud roar from the gallery.

“Even those, I do not doubt, were gov-

erned also, in common with the majority of you, by the more trivial motive of curiosity. A few of you have read my books, more have seen my name in the newspapers, more, still, have had my name, habits and characteristics dinned into their ears during the past few weeks in order that this hall might be filled. The great majority of you came to listen to me on this subject as they would have come to listen to me on any other subject: they came, that is, at best to pick up a few scraps of information, at worst to listen idly, looking forward to a chance of laughter or cheap emotion, liking to gape at a picturesque celebrity, of whom, after a week's close contact, they would be thoroughly tired. 'Primary Functions of Art,' indeed! Why, half of you barely understand what the words mean, and even if I told you would forget it by to-morrow."

The storm broke now uncontrollably. Even in the front rows angry gentlemen got up and exclaimed "Intolerable!" Some began to shepherd their womenfolk away; others remained standing, and saying "Sit down, sir," "Monstrous, sir." Behind them all restraint was rapidly disappearing. Men stood shouting and waving their fists. Howling groups pressed their way up the gangways. The back of the hall, lost now to all sense of respectability and local pride,

was a tumult of songs, cat-calls and yells of execration. The lady in the front row was in a state of silent ecstasy. Winter's calm fell off him as he made a last desperate effort to be heard. His veins stood out, his arms waved, the pink tie fluttered in the air, and he bellowed with the full force of his lungs: "Yes, and the last touch of asininity and humbug is given by the customary idiocy of putting in the chair a man who, if it hadn't been for this row, would have been fast asleep. Look at his face! What on earth does this Lord Mayor know about Art? What does he care?"

The Lord Mayor put his hands on the table, and half rose, his eyes bulging incredulously from his red face. "This sack of stocks and shares," roared Winter, in a pythagorean frenzy; "This great donkey! This walrus! This frog!" The Lord Mayor sprang towards him. The concourse, exasperated beyond measure by this last insult to Mulcaster, bawled, hissed, hooted, thundered. A vast pack of hot faces began pressing against the platform. Some climbed on others' shoulders. Mr. Maxwell acted. He seized Winter, flung him across to Jump, and escaped as by a miracle into a side street and a cab. Simultaneously with its starting, a great horde, howling like wolves, burst out into the street. The cab darted ahead.

Mulcaster was saved from the disgrace of a lynching. "My hat and bag," complained Winter, now in a state of collapse, as the cab rounded the first corner.

"Get off without them, damn you," said Mr. Maxwell, who had never sworn in his life before. "Shove him into the train, Jump," he said, "I'm getting out here. I can't stand it any longer. I hope you realise you've ruined us," he exclaimed, in a voice husky with grief. But he hadn't ruined them.

Alas for the frailty of human nature and the special weaknesses of an advertising age! "Any sort of publicity," as Winter, in his decline, had learnt to say, "is better than none." The next day's headlines, certainly, described his conduct as extraordinary. But it immensely extended his fame; his precise words faded from memory; and thenceforth he was in far greater demand, both as an author and lecturer, than he had ever been before. Within three weeks he himself firmly believed that he had deliberately done the whole thing as a stunt; he chuckled about it as his friends declared that he was even cleverer and more daring than they had thought. Some time passed before the officials of the Mulcaster Literary Society recovered from their shock; but eventually even Mr. Maxwell forgave what he now thought

to have been a joke, if a poor one; and when a plumper Winter, after three years, returned to the city in a large touring car, it was to deliver a lecture (at a very large fee in a theatre) on quite orthodox, wise and whimsical lines. One sly allusion to his previous appearance and disappearance in Mulcaster brought the house down.

Only the Lord Mayor suffered. He, poor man, became such a butt that he had to retire from public life.

VII: THE CEMETERY

I

IT is possible to have a great reputation in letters and yet make very little money. It is possible to have a fairly respectable reputation and make hardly any money at all. This is especially so with poets. Lionel Crewe was a poet.

From time to time he had published a book in prose. None of these had been novels. There was a dialogue on æsthetics, a small monograph on Michael Angelo, a collection of essays on Life and Art, and a volume of rather solid reprinted reviews. These works had been treated with consideration by all the reputable critics, and with deference by those who will treat anything with deference if they are sure at once that it is intelligent and that it cannot possibly be popular. They said that he had "a distinguished mind"; his sober reflections gave them an opportunity to talk about intuition, abstract reality, Croce and Bergson; the normal reader, perusing these comments in a slightly bewildered way, was given the impression that he was hopelessly beyond the

pale. Yet even those who used Crewe's speculations as a smoke-screen always gave their reviews some such heading as "The Prose of a Poet." Nobody else appeared to read this prose at all, and whenever Crewe found that some one had read one of these books he sadly assumed that the gentleman (for it was never a lady) had been the recipient of a review copy. Sales were negligible. The booksellers were slightly bitten once, but not again; and no two of these works were issued with the same publisher's imprint.

Even the poems had appeared with a variety of publishers, and even these were far from lucrative. Two of Crewe's early books had gone into a second edition, but no more. Extension Lecturers who discussed Modern Literature never talked about his books, and there was no demand for them in the shops just before Christmas. Habitual critics of poetry usually mentioned him with respect when they remembered him; though they always kept review copies of his books, they did not often refer to them. His first book of lyrics had been received with some warmth and then forgotten; when he followed it up with a play called "Artaxerxes" everybody said it ought to be staged; but when it was staged, by a Society, for one performance, nobody went to see it. He drove steadily on,

now with a book of Elegies, now with a dramatic monologue in blank verse, now with a narrative poem concerning Tristram and Iseult or Paris and Helen. The corpus of his works had become considerable; his standing was respectable; his earnings, as we have said, were negligible. Men conversing about him would say that he was good but somehow dull; they admired him when they were reading him, but when they were not reading him they didn't want to read him. There was a lack of fascination about him; he wanted aerating; the acuter diagnosed a disease which manifested itself by many symptoms. He was at once genuine and derivative; his expression was in a manner his own, yet constantly reminiscent of the great dead, and the more elderly dead, Milton, Dante, Goethe and Wordsworth, in particular; he lacked always the last touches of fire, of accuracy and of music; and he was oddly out of touch with his contemporaries. His works might have been written thirty years earlier; and it must be admitted that if his contemporaries showed little interest in him he displayed a similar indifference to them. Not usually given to irony, Crewe would sometimes smile to himself when he saw that some new anthologist had once more copied the same two familiar selections instead of referring direct to his books; it did

not occur to him that anthologists automatically assumed that two poems from Crewe would be enough and knew that no one would complain of the absence of more. For Crewe cherished, in his quiet way, a very good opinion of his own powers and performance.

Few, probably, suspected how good was his opinion of himself. He did not boast or, unless invited, even talk about his writings. Most of his acquaintances thought him modest. He seldom entertained in his own flat; his most frequent visitors were a few old college friends who swore by him, believed him to be a great poet (if unreadable by persons so stupid as themselves) and far better than all the fashionable scribblers whose names filled people's mouths. Nevertheless he "floated about" a good deal; he never refused an invitation to attend a dinner or sit on a committee; and only the acutest, whose acuteness was born of sympathy, and whose sympathy bred silence also, perceived that when, politely and tranquilly, he took his place among his fellows, he did so as one who felt himself entitled to be invited anywhere, and was secretly justified by the conviction that his rightful place was with his peers at the head of any table. They were right. Neglect annoyed him a little. He had seldom read his juniors, ex-

cept occasionally in magazines, since he was twenty-five, and he was now fifty; he was not jealous of them, but thought them very trivial, and entirely lacking in both management and magnificence; it certainly seemed absurd that people should chatter about them so much, and he could not conceal from himself that whenever he was able to say about one of these, "I'm afraid I don't know his work very well," it gave him a certain pleasure. There were those, the simpler and less cultivated of the persons he encountered, who were impressed by this; there were elderly circles where, although he was not read, his name was vaguely known, but which had not yet heard rumour of his juniors, more celebrated in another world. Yet it would be giving a false impression to suggest that he brooded overmuch. He was really devoted to his art and quite convinced that he was the successor and equal of all the great poets, and that more than any other living man he would have been the chosen companion and comprehending friend of Coleridge, Arnold and Shakespeare. When he thought of his career as a career in a competition he was consoled by the certainty that he was in the end bound to win it. His own age might have underrated him at thirty and at forty; if he lived long enough his work would survive the flashy

ephemerides; in any event he would be a classic after his death. Meanwhile, having an income, he could afford to wait; and it was something that the wiser heads among his own contemporaries had a regard for him. He smiled now and then when he got a letter from no matter whom, saying: "I may be a foggy, but I find your work much more satisfying and substantial than all this young stuff." The most devastating of the criticisms made about him in an opposite sense, he naturally never heard; they were confined to conversation.

He was fifty—he had always had a fiftyish air about him—when the first serious turning-point of his life came; for it had not seriously deranged him when the only woman to whom he had ever proposed had refused him. In brief, he lost all his money. An oilfield was devastated by an army, a republic defaulted, a managing director absconded, and Lionel Crewe, after half a life dedicated to Art, had to get a job. It was a distasteful business to look for one; it involved making humble requests to rather coarse literary friends upon whom he had liked privately, always strictly privately, to look down, men who always obtusely failed to see that they ought to treat him with a certain deference. With whatever reluctance, he swallowed his pride and set about it. There was nothing

for it but something connected with literature; the spontaneous and quixotic offer of an old friend, who had heard of his misfortune, to teach him the work of an indigo importer could not be accepted, and he began a progress through every office in Fleet Street where he knew anybody. His reception was uniformly cordial until his mission was known, when smiles and delicate compliments gave way to head waggings, anxious frowns, lip-pursings, and promises to "look out for something." A few novels to review was all that his trip brought him, and he was wondering whether to advertise for a secretaryship, when he happened to meet a man, a politico-literary peer in point of fact, in the reading-room of the club. Accident brought out his circumstances; an introduction was offered and gratefully accepted; and after lunch next day Crewe went off again in good hopes of getting something out of the editor of *The Morning Sun*, as staid, solid and influential a daily newspaper as any in England. He was shown up into a panelled room where a youngish man with a bald forehead and pince-nez sat, holding the torn-open note in his hand. It was the celebrated Mr. J. Willis Wills, a Power in the Land.

As Mr. Wills was not inhuman the interview was not without its embarrassment for

him. It is not pleasant to have a proud, cultivated and accomplished gentleman suing one, with whatever air of assumed coolness, for a job of almost any sort. Mr. Wills did not display his embarrassment and Lionel Crewe did not perceive it. Mr. Wills was, in fact, of the two far the more percipient. It did not, for example, take him long to decide, in spite of Crewe's assertion that he was willing to do anything, that he was actually qualified to do virtually nothing. "Not politics, I suppose?" asked Mr. Wills. "No, of course not politics," replied Crewe. Mr. Wills's thoughts scurried round like eager birds looking for an opening in a cage. The drama, music, the pictures: these were all covered and one couldn't sack a promising subordinate to oblige a friend's friend. Crewe was patently (he could not hoodwink himself) not the man for a special reporter; he had no office training which would enable him to devil for the working staff. However, Charity will find out the way. Mr. Wills had an idea. He smiled brightly and firmly slapped an open palm on his desk: "I've got it," he said, "there's the Cemetery. There's a lot to be done there and we can keep you busy for a long time." He added, remembering with whom he was dealing, "If you'd consent to do that, we'd really be most exceedingly grateful."

II

The cemetery, graveyard, mausoleum, catacomb or vault in a newspaper office is a department whose existence might be deduced more widely than it is. Eminent men seldom give three days' clear notice of their impending deaths; not only that, but they have a habit of dying at the most inconvenient hours from the Fleet Street point of view. They will drop dead from heart disease at eleven o'clock on a Sunday night; or their sudden disappearance in mid-Atlantic will be reported just when all competent hands are busy coping with a political crisis. Some of them complicate matters still further by giving scarcely any particulars about their lives and performances in the handy reference books. Nevertheless, choose they their moments never so awkwardly, they cannot outmanœuvre the vigilant hawks of the Press. They may die when they will: the next editions will contain full summaries of their careers, cool and considered estimates of their wisdom and stature. The public, sleek tyrant, takes what it gets as a matter of course. Cæsar clad in purple, certainly did not bother as to who fished the murex up; if he wanted nightingales' tongues all the year round, he got them; he would have been annoyed if they were not there. The

gross and unwondering Israelites took manna in the wilderness as a matter of course, and asked no questions about water from the rock: that was Moses's job, and what on earth was he good for if he could not do that? The parallel need not be carried farther; but the miracles of the press need a certain amount of preparation. Those obituaries, of three inches or three columns, which so promptly and comprehensively recite the birth and achievements of the dead, are not composed whilst the printer stands waiting. Those lists of dates and publications, speeches and appointments, those copious summaries of the upward struggles of Prime Ministers and artists, Lunacy Commissioners and Artillery Colonels, are not the spontaneous effusions of omniscience. They are written in advance, kept ready in galley proof, so that the printer can get to work as soon as the fatal news comes in. And naturally, since men often survive their first fame for many years, they are from time to time brought up to date.

That was the task to which Lionel Crewe was consigned. He was, Mr. Wills saw suddenly, obviously a safe man, as well as an educated man. "You will find them all," he said, "in pigeon-holes arranged alphabetically. You need not worry about the politicians, bishops and so on; confine yourself

to the literary men, the painters (if you feel equal to them) and the scholars. I'm afraid some of them are very old. Give yourself a free hand. Where you feel inclined, write a whole new notice. See to it that a man's obituary is suitably enlarged where he has become much more important since he was last attended to. Where you can introduce something from personal knowledge, do."

"I think," said Crewe, "I know the sort of thing."

"Yes, of course you do. You've probably read thousands of them. My assistant, Mr. Hughes, will introduce you to the composing-room, and if you find yourself in any difficulty he'll be able to put you right. You might just, as a matter of form, show him your first specimen, but I'm sure it will be all right."

With the rest of that conversation we need not detain ourselves. The first example, the subject of which was dictated by Hughes, was thoroughly satisfactory. Mr. Hughes was a cheery journalist with a respect for men of letters, and Crewe warmed to his kindness. Crewe's corrections and additions to the yellow strip of type that was given to him were so extensive that Mr. Hughes deemed it necessary to set the whole thing over again and get a clean proof for filing.

"It saves time later," he explained; "speeds up the setting and gives us the measurement in advance. Slight corrections don't, of course, matter. Well, you will be all right here now, won't you? Just get on with it as you think fit. Ring if you are out of paper or the fire wants making up; and let Mr. Donkin have any stuff you want set. They'll probably come up for three or four small notices in the course of the day; if you're still here you might as well just have a look at them to see that they're all right. But these devils nearly always insist on dying just as we're going to press."

He banged the door and disappeared.

III

It was a high room and quiet. The sun came in over the neighbouring roofs. Crewe sat down, stood up irresolutely, and sat down again, turning his chair to face the long wall, which, from window to door, and from ceiling to floor, was covered with wooden drawers, bearing lettered labels, varying in antiquity. There suddenly came over him a feeling of awe as he gazed at that great flat honeycomb of the predestinate dead. He wondered whether those rosy-cheeked men, riding now, or walking the streets, haranguing crowds or suavely conversing in

offices, would turn pale if they could visualise this place where they were all already in the past tense. The sample which he had just revised—the corpse was a vociferous elderly critic, probably taking the chair at a public dinner that very night—had begun with: “It is with very great regret that we record the death of”; it was full of chilling preterites and pluperfects; and it ended with a sentence beginning “The deceased gentleman was twice married.” Here, embraced within a few cubic feet, was the memento mori for thousands; a spectacle which, by telescoping history, reduced all human effort and ambition to nullity. Ten years of striving and plotting, desperate travelling and talking, might pass; or twenty years; but then, with absolute certainty, out would come the drawer, the folder, the long slip, and what was determined would be done. These notices took upon themselves the similitude of vague vigilant animals waiting unseen in their holes, motionless and sleepless, for the moment to pounce where there was never defence. Beyond the individuals, he reflected, here was the Age itself, already dead and gone, beaten down and dismissed; then he smiled ironically, as he reflected that it would indulge in one slight reprisal on its successor by perpetuating, in its self-written epitaphs, its own complacencies and its

own commonplaces. "Ab-Ad," "Ock-Oll": what a magazine! So Crewe's thoughts wandered whilst the dust specks wandered in the mild sun-rays; then he pulled himself together, reminded himself that he had a living to earn, and resolved to begin looking for his confrères under letter "A." He pulled out the first drawer, which was high up, got it down, flapped up a number of blue cardboard jackets, opened one and saw a proof and some cuttings, and then was struck by an idea. He felt a little sickness in the pit of his stomach and then he felt himself blush. He recoiled and stood still, his eye fixed on a drawer in the second row down. It was labelled "By-Cru" and it stood out before his gaze as though it alone were in focus and all the rest in a mist.

"By." "Bywater" perhaps. "Cru," Cruden; Cruden's "Concordance"; possibly a descendant in the army. And in between them, with great and small, long and short, the one which mattered more than all the rest put together. There, somewhere, was the *Sun's* verdict on Lionel Crewe, stowed away, forgotten, until the day when it also should be needed. A proof of type like the rest, cold, fixed, retrospective, checking off in brief statements all that his dreams had meant to him, the evidence of an artist sandwiched, possibly, between the obituaries of

two wholesale grocers. The blood went to his head, and his heart beat rapidly. He simply must have a look at it. Attempting an air of unconcern—for men do not reserve all their histrionics for company—he pulled out the drawer and carried it to the table.

For a minute he could not find what he was seeking. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps the whole truth was that his contemporaries did not really suppose him worth recording at all; but, come, this was too much, this was impossible! He turned them over again and came to a thin folder which he had missed, outside which was written "Creswell, Crether, Crew, Crewe." His hands trembled as he opened it. He noticed that Admiral Crether, of whom he had never heard, had two long galleys to himself, and he could not resist, already, a novel pang of jealousy and a protesting snort. Was he here? Yes, here he was. One strip; his name at the top; about five inches of type. A date at the end was four years past.

Walking about the room, he read it at great speed. As he read, his step quickened and his mouth tightened. He looked through it again, more slowly, and then laid it on the table. "It's scandalous," he cried, "it's abominable."

"It's so utterly stupid and ignorant," he cried, and paused again.

"I can't expect every one to agree, but it's patently absurd. It's so damned unjust," he wailed. You could not hope for fine criticism in an obituary written by some odd hack turned on to the job, but the *Sun* really was expected to maintain a certain standard. It had a responsibility towards itself and its readers, and its readers had faith in it. The other obituaries he had glanced at had, on the whole, been sound and fair; the one he had brought up to date had been a really creditable and balanced criticism of a man who had enjoyed more reputation than he deserved. "Just like my luck," muttered Crewe, who was always frank with himself about his luck, though he had never specifically complained to others. And he visualised all respectable England reading this coarse and careless rubbish at its breakfast tables, and confirmed for life in its habit of neglecting and underestimating the works of Lionel Crewe, the solidest, most durable poet of his time. Then, with the ground failing beneath his feet, he had the horrid thought that, after all, things need not always come right, even in the end. He had always been supported by the consoling conviction that posterity would rectify the wrongs of the present. He might be outshone by a thousand charlatans now, but his death would be a signal for a re-estimate; he would be in

the Pantheon as long as civilisation lasted. As he looked at the dreadful dismissal of the late Mr. Crewe even this hope wavered. Surely this, in so authoritative a quarter, might damp down all curiosity about him, warn off all investigators: then time might pass and he might be relegated for ever to the limbo where even Herrick, who lived in an age of few poets, had once been hidden for over a century. It was cruel! It was beastly! It was not to be borne! Tastes might differ, but the grotesque was the grotesque. These calculated damnings with faint praise burnt word for word into his mind. He could shut his eyes to see them in bright letters: "Crewe's thought always had a certain kind of distinction and his language a certain kind of dignity. . . . His style was distinctly derivative. . . . He showed little originality in his choice of subjects. . . . He was out of touch with the main movements in contemporary literature; his imagery was on the conventional side, his psychology can only be described as distinctly on the beaten track, and there was a savour of academic eloquence about his writing. . . . His verse was not unmusical, but it was not conspicuously musical; at moments he seemed to glimpse heights which he never achieved. . . . It might have been better for him if he had never read Milton and Words-

worth. . . . There was perhaps a considerable poet buried in him, but something—maybe a lack of direct contact with life as men live it—seemed to prevent its disinterment. . . . He will be remembered, if he is remembered at all, as a gifted man who never failed in his regard for the great traditions of letters, and a poet who in one or two lyrics showed what, in happier circumstances, he might have achieved. . . . Of his prose works, which included a good deal of the best and most useful kind of literary journalism, the most conspicuous is perhaps the monograph on Michael Angelo, which resumes very succinctly the main facts of the great painter's life, character and influence and which well deserves to be reprinted. . . .”

How utterly wretched! This, as a description of a life of devoted service to letters! Crewe paced and paced the room and then, with a gesture of despair, took up his hat and went out to lunch. As an afterthought he carried the offensive proof with him; he set it before him at the luncheon table and mused. There were additions to it in a neat small hand; it struck him, after some contemplation, that the hand was one which he could imitate.

The thought was no sooner entertained than repelled in horror. “Forger,” cried an

inner voice, "how could you think of such a thing!" Very depressed, he abandoned the idea, went back to his work, and carried on. Yet, when he left the office, and again next morning, the temptation recurred insistently. "You can do nobody any harm," urged another inner voice, "and you will be doing a service to the cause of truth." The pressure was never intermitted and at last, after a week, he yielded.

Almost without intending it, he began by striking out a few words, an operation the performance of which did not need any simulation at all. "His thought had always a certain kind of distinction and his language a certain kind of dignity." What was the meaning of that grudging qualification? how could it be justified? why should the *Sun* make a fool of itself by printing anything so stupid? He hesitated; then he drew out his fountain pen in order to strike out "a certain kind of" in two places. Surely, he thought, there was nothing wrong in that; he was merely doing his duty to this obituary as he had been instructed to do it to them all. He gazed; he paused; he acted.

IV

Each day for several weeks, in the midst of a conscientious application to his regular

labours, Crewe took down the file which contained his own little slip, reconsidered it, and amended it in the interests of mere truth. A "scarcely" went, an "almost" went, a "rather" went, and various qualifications such as "if he is remembered at all." For a time he confined himself to simple excisions; but when he had cut out all that he was inclined to cut out, the notice, shorter even than it was to begin with, was still very unsatisfactory. He was, both instinctively and deliberately, a man of great intellectual integrity. He had no desire to cheat or get more than his due; he thought as much (he told himself) about the prestige and responsibility of the *Sun* as he did about his own reputation. It was really a wrong thing that what was, in such matters and on such occasions, the highest national authority, inspiring much of the metropolitan and virtually all the provincial and colonial press, should provide an inaccurate and incompetent record. Patently, in his own case as much as in others, it was his duty as a man whom the *Sun* trusted as an expert, to improve this ridiculous screed and bring it nearer the plain facts. Some improvements were quite obvious and very few days had passed before he made them. He hesitated slightly before his first employment of the false handwriting; but he was soon persuaded that the end

justified the means, since the end was the mere avoidance, by eschewing his own hand, of a very unlikely discussion originating one could hardly guess where, but certainly in some quarter not properly equipped for a literary controversy. "There was a savour of academic eloquence about his writing!" Hang it all, this showed a plain misapprehension of indisputable facts! Had he not always quite deliberately aimed at that loftiness of expression which he believed to be the proper vesture of the Muse? Had he not consciously stood as an opponent of the modern tendency towards a flat conversationalism in movement and vocabulary? Had he not always been ready with clear-cut grounds even for the employment of a certain measure of archaism? This obituary had obviously been written by some unthinking parrot of a man who had merely repeated what he had heard from parties on whom Crewe had always frowned and who were, as he thought, responsible for the degeneration and disintegration of English literature. He would leave the truth, he decided, but place it in its proper aspect. He deleted that sentence about academic eloquence and substituted: "he maintained, both in his theory and in his practice, that most modern writers have made a fatal mistake in throwing overboard half the resonance of the great

tongue which they have inherited, and in his longer works, he deliberately, and almost alone in his generation, endeavoured, as the greatest of our poets endeavoured before him, to clothe high thoughts in high language. He did not, in fact, disdain organ music." The same fact was stated; no new judgment was expressed; the thing was merely put accurately. Similar modifications he introduced into the reference to his choice of subjects. Why this assumption that the greatest subjects in the world had been exhausted? Had not Milton thought of reviving the Arthurian legends, had not the nineteenth century revived them? Why should Swinburne write the hundredth Tristram poem and he not the hundred-and-first? Why this idiotic assumption that the immortal myth of Helen of Troy could not be refertilised by the thought and feeling of each successive generation?

Each day for several weeks he altered here a little and there a little, in minute writing on the ample margins. He brought almost every sentence of this critical summary into a closer relation with indisputable truth; then it occurred to him that not a single point that had been made had been illustrated by quotation. It was clear that, from any point of view, obituary criticism, like any other criticism, must be more informa-

tive, interesting and convincing, if the points were adequately illustrated. Crewe knew his own poems by heart, and he was at no loss for admirable quotations—how well they looked out of their contexts, he could not help thinking—to display all the principal characteristics of his art. He quoted a peroration on which he had always prided himself; a description of one of his classical heroines; a passage which showed (for this, surely, had to be demonstrated too) that, when there was fitting occasion, he could be colloquially simple with the best of them; and a whole short lyric which exhibited an especially neglected branch of his activity. This done (not, it must be realised, without long delays, fresh considerations, new and carefully weighed out decisions) he added two representative quotations from his philosophic pieces, necessary to show his creative work in its right relief. Now and again he would add also some fact which had been omitted; there were particulars as to his friendships; there were a few maxims on which he had always prided himself and which he believed to be salutary. All this, he was persuaded, was not so much dictated by egotistic motives as by the assurance that the cause in which he believed stood in need of propaganda. Was it not resonable that,

finally, he should round off the incomplete statement by references to what were evidently the tenets of one or two of his poetic contemporaries, who had a different theory of expression; references that were, of course, not hostile, but merely by way of definition.

Three months had passed since he had begun work in the Cemetery. He had earned his keep, he flattered himself; all the literary biographies in those rows of berths were now polished and up to date; and his own was now as good as the others. It was not, of course, either as full or as laudatory as it would have been had another person, familiar with his works, written it. But at least bare justice had been done, and, though it was difficult to calculate the precise gross length of the scores of additions which now covered the blank yellow stretch of unprinted galley, the five inches had probably been expanded into a full column, a column worthy of three rows of headlines. He read it through for the last time one summer day, just before lunch, and replaced it in its nook determined not again to disturb it. Full of the subject he left his room and the building, and walked down to Blackfriars Bridge, where he automatically leant upon the parapet of the Embankment and looked at the swirling waters of high tide. He felt

strangely detached from life; void of all impulse towards further original creation; looking forward to nothing.

Suddenly a strange idea took possession of him. He had prepared for his death: why not die? Thirty years of jealousies and resentments came to a head in him. These people had ignored and deprecated him all these years, chasing after every sort of will-o'-the-wisp whilst they were blind to the radiance of his own steady lamp. Why not teach them a lesson? Why not show them that they had fatuously ignored a Master living amongst them? Once that *Sun* obituary had appeared none of them would ever dare to be half-hearted again about him; they would know and they would have to re-orientate themselves.

There was the water. He could not swim, and he had the will to sink. It was only one movement over the stones and he would fall and drown. He could, if he liked, leave a message on the bank; but that was hardly necessary. Just that little action, and tomorrow's *Sun* would promulgate the fact of his eminence, the names of all his books, the signal grandeur of his finest passages, to every educated household in the country. Yes; this was the natural sequel to his preparations, the final polish of his justifiable revenge. He placed a hand upon the para-

pet and prepared to scramble over to his death.

At this moment he heard voices, quite close to him. A young man and a young woman had come into the same bay, and were talking to each other affectionately but intelligently. "Look at the sun on the red sails of those barges," the girl suddenly said; "isn't it lovely!" Crewe involuntarily looked at the sunlight, which he had not noticed all day, fostering the rich red-brown of the sails; and a pang shot through his heart. Other similar passages followed, making a similar impression on him, and then, strikingly if unoriginally, to the evident admiration of her companion, the girl broke out with, "Well, we may be hard up, but it's good to be alive!"

The phrase was not new to Lionel Crewe. But somehow he had never properly taken it in before. He was on the verge of suicide and it assumed a new force. Good to be alive; yes, it was good to be alive! There was the sun, there were the barges; there were the stone walls and the water poppling past them, there were the people and the trams, the farther shore and the sky. They all shone with beauty and mystery, and as, with palpitating heart, he drank the spectacle in, his thought began ranging the whole universe of his experience. Life; how multi-

tudinous and how rich it was! His own hand, lying on the stone, was a wonder. Everything he had ever seen was a wonder. There were all the continents and cities, rivers and forests; all the busy millions of men in their fields and factories; all the seas and their ships, all the deserts and their secrets. There was day with its radiance and night with its softness and stars; there were the seasons: spring, with its burst of green buds from the black trees, summer and its succession of the insects and flowers, autumn and its harvest moon and leaf-strewn pools, winter and its miraculous frosts. Beyond all these symbols, to be contemplated in Life alone, was the mystery of eternity, of the roots from which sprang every planet and every blossom and every human soul.

Lionel Crewe was excited as he had never been excited before. He reached out to grasp all things, and to mould them all to his song. A new neighbour broke his thought and he returned to earth to remember his preposterous resolve. He had been going to his death; and why? Simply for fame, a fame which he would not see, and a fame which must at best be fleeting in comparison with the life of the earth, itself a thing of no duration. In a hundred years all his critics, rivals and friends would be dead;

some, by a minority, would still be remembered. In three hundred years that company, with or without his own name, would be much sparser. In a thousand years? Well, but in ten thousand? The very fame of Homer, he saw, would dwindle and die in a geological age; what did it matter, whether long or short? He was bothering, he now knew, over something that did not matter, employing complicated stratagems to entrap something that would vanish when it was caught. "God," he muttered to himself, "what a fool I have been!" With a new wisdom in his eyes and a half smile on his lips he turned from the wall and walked northward.

He went into a public house, had a glass of beer and a sandwich, and hurried back to the *Sun* office. The nearer he approached it the faster he went; and, once inside the building, he began leaping up the stairs three at a time. Turning the first corner he bumped violently into somebody, nearly knocking him over. It was Mr. Hughes, as cheerful as ever.

"Hallo," said Mr. Hughes, "forgotten something?"

"No," cried Crewe, racing past him with an apology, "remembered something."

Up four flights he went, along the corridor, round the corner, and into his familiar

headquarters. The very room seemed to greet him with a new friendliness, as though knowing that he had thrown off the burdens both of life and of his subterfuge. He slapped down his hat, flung off his coat, pulled down the familiar dossier, plucked out the much-tinkered obituary, and set to work with a gusto such as he had never before known. His first action was to shear off the whole bottom of the proof with the scissors; this removed at one stroke nine-tenths of his elaborate additions. Next he blocked out every other addition he had made; and finally he set himself to reduce the notice to the shortest reasonable dimensions. Having done this he was still not satisfied. This, after all, was only a game. He was full of poetry now; it sang in his head, superb stuff with unprecedented rhythms; he felt the necessity of saying, for the sheer sake of saying, what he thought of his previous aims and achievements. "Rather an academic artificer than a poet," he wrote in, still employing the calligraphy of his old deceit. "Mr. Crewe's work was all bred out of books," he wrote; and "concoction not inspiration is the word that occurs to one." A few adjectives such as "pompous," "dull" and "wooden" were discreetly sprinkled about, and he looked at the completed work with a smile of satisfaction.

The first Lionel Crewe had now been described as he deserved.

He had finished for the day. He strode out. He was going to begin a new career forthwith; the hidden springs of his nature had been unsealed and he was not going to care a dump what any one, living or unborn, would say about him. He returned to his lodgings to enjoy the prospect: unhappily we shall never know what he would have made of it, for he died that evening of heart failure.

The news reached the *Sun* offices late, through a Press Agency. The person in charge was an underling; he sent a menial upstairs for Lionel Crewe's obituary, glanced at it, and sent it down to the printer. Next morning it appeared, and the small world that bothered about such things was profoundly shocked. Crewe had some genuine admirers, not of the first order of percipience; there were many other people who respected him without admiring him; there was a third class of people who had never read a line he had written but were quite prepared to join in any campaign on behalf of the maltreated Muses against the pachydermatous Philistines. The first section started the row; the other two sections willingly enough joined in. A great writer, they said, had been treated unpardonably by a

great newspaper; the only possible reply was a mass meeting of sympathisers. The meeting was held; a Crewe Society was formed; various members engaged themselves to write at length, in all the best quarters, on the signal merits of Crewe's work; and, in five minutes, it was arranged that a memorial edition should be published, and that the Dean of Westminster would be asked to admit a tablet into the Poets' Corner in the Abbey. This request, owing to lack of space and the blind faith that the Dean could not help reposing on the edicts of the *Sun*, was refused; the subscriptions were diverted to a statue in a Bayswater Square. The din made was so great that the general public bought Crewe's works in large numbers, and he was established, for at least a century, as part of the canon of English literature.

VIII: THE PAINFUL DILEMMA

I

THE obeying of conscience, even for a man with the best of intentions and no thought for self, is not always an easy matter. Conscience is often a Cerberus, a double-headed hound with two fierce throats yelping "dictates," and two ravening maws gaping in rivalry for the single and indivisible bone of "placation." A man can only do his best. He must often make his choice on the spur of the moment, and yet he must risk reproach for not choosing otherwise. These embarrassments, common to the life of all men who control their actions and censor their motives, come in certain peculiar forms to the arbiters of the arts. Ought an editor to print a barely tolerable article because he knows its author to be a struggling hero who supports a wife, a mother, a mother-in-law and five children? Ought he to accept weak verses from a rich man because he hopes to persuade the rich man to spend a large amount of money on scholarships or the succour of poor artists? Ought a critic to overpraise a writer because he has been underpraised by others or because a

little favourable notice may enable him, a deserving human, to earn his next year's meals? How far should the morals of an able work influence the critic's decision to notice or not to notice it, since all notice must attract attention to it? How far is a critic entitled, out of a consideration for a friend's feelings, to suppress his conviction that that friend's vogue as an artist is utterly unjustified and that the public's eyes should be opened to the fact that they have been worshipping a sham whilst ignoring better men? Such questions, in the form of dilemmas, present themselves daily. It is all very well for you, bold Reader, to answer them all with a loud "No," "Yes," or "Not at all." But they are never quite so simple as they appear here.

II

It was a winter's evening. Two men were in a Chelsea library-drawing-room after an early supper. Ronald Cameron, young, fair, tall, good-looking, was standing in evening dress. His host, John Fulford, darker and older, sat by a table covered with books. These men were two of the most reputable and influential critics in London, Fulford of books, Cameron of the drama; they were waiting for Fulford's wife.

"It's a filthy night outside," said Cameron, "I don't like leaving this fire. I hope Dolly will think the theatre worth it."

"Oh, she's sure to enjoy it. I'd rather you than I though, to-night," replied Fulford.

"What shall you do?"

"I shall probably work. I've a lot of reviews to do. There's this wretched novel of poor old Hoffman's. I wish to the Lord I could say something good of it. I saw him last week. He's such a harmless creature and he looked at me with the pleading eyes of a dog. He simply lives for his Art and he's no use at it. I shall have another look at it, but it's just as mediocre as the rest. I shan't be able to mention it at all."

Cameron lit a cigarette and laughed. "It's a pity," he said, "that so many nice men write bad books."

"Yes," said Fulford, rising as his wife entered, "and that so many swine write good ones. Well, good-bye both of you; I hope you will enjoy yourselves. You'll find me here when you come back."

"I trust so," said Dolly, laughing; and off they went.

Fulford got himself a drink, settled in his chair, and began work. That is to say he took up the top book from the pile by the reading lamp, lit a cigarette, laid the book

on his knees, and gazed into the fire. He had, they said, an interesting face: it was aquiline and worn by forty-five years of intense living. His long legs stretched out to the fender; now and then he sipped at his glass or felt in the box for another cigarette; now and then he gently swept back a lock of thick dark hair from his forehead. At moments he frowned, at moments bit his under lip or gently cursed. For he was thinking of Alexander Hoffman, pitying him, longing to do something for him, at a loss to discover how. He had known this man for ten years; ever since the aspirant after immortal laurels had thrown up his clerkship, at twenty-three, and entered into that literary fray for which he was so singularly unfitted. He had first come to Fulford at the *Sentinel* office with an unnecessary introduction given with facile benevolence by another literary editor who had merely wished to fob him off—for thus do some novices tramp the full circle of the editorial rooms, hope diminishing with each new kind offer. Hoffman's face was already prematurely aged, his eyes bright in their deep hollows, lines running from the base of his large nose to the sides of his sensitive mouth, his curly hair even then preparing to retreat at the temples. In ten years, Fulford realised with a pang, ten years of frustration

and underfeeding, that quite young man had grown grey. He remembered that first conversation, the anxious persistence of that even gentle voice with its marked cockney accent. Hoffman was not so much (though he had to live) asking for work as for recognition of the genius in his unpublished manuscripts; it had gradually dawned on Fulford that he united in unique combination excessive personal shyness and humility with impenetrable confidence in his powers as an artist. Fulford led him on to talk, smiled assent convincingly, was more and more taken and touched as the little man poured out his history and his ambitions. Hoffman talked at large about the changing scope of the novel, the possibilities of psychology, his own determination to explore new territories of technique. His eyes shone, his smile grew intensely eager, whenever his suggestions seemed to find a response. And (Fulford remembered) it was evident, for all his knowledge, enthusiasm, independence, fierce determination to hold the world at attention, that he lacked everything which might make him what he wished to be. His ideas were half-baked and odd, whilst his expression was commonplace in detail and contorted at large; he had no sense of humour and obviously no power of instinctively understanding other human beings. He was

not perceptive, not subtle; he had no agility of mind, only a great obstinacy of conviction; he could talk but was too absorbed in his own notions to listen; he had no feeling for the shades of words; there was a fire within him, but it was not the divine fire. Yet Fulford had been attracted. He had liked him, been drawn to him, wanted to help him, genuinely hoped that he should succeed somehow, that he should find things more comfortable, and taste some kind, any kind, of success. Then the little man suddenly remembered he was in the presence of what, compared with himself, was a potentate whose careless hands could scatter blessings and curses, had checked himself, shyly apologised for wasting his elder's time, and wistfully, stammeringly asked the vital question. "Couldn't you," he said, "assist me with a little reviewing, Mr. Fulford? It would help me to keep going while I am finishing my book."

Fulford could not remember now what book he had, with a knowledge that he was to this extent betraying his paper, doled out to the eager hands. The result, at all events, came down to expectations. A few later experiments—unless an experiment must contain an element of uncertainty—were made, though Hoffman could not help seeing in time that behind Fulford's "You see our

reviewing staff is already too full" there was a very half-hearted appreciation of the merits of his work. Fulford could recall still the general nature of those incompetent reviews, shapeless mixtures of dullness and crankiness, with a queer ineffective force in them and always some King Charles' head, Dostoevsky or Freud, dragged in, even were the book a record of travel or a polite social comedy. Every time, though no one else knew it, Fulford had received a letter of complaint from some hot-blooded reader enraged at the reviewer's "silliness," "juvenile cocksureness," and "bad English." They were far from the truth in the pictures they had formed of the Unknown Objectable; but Fulford knew well, though he returned evasive answers, that in essence they were right. In the end he had to push Hoffman off, giving him every possible token of good feeling except the work for which he yearned. It was to Hoffman's credit that he never conceived the slightest grudge; he was sad that Fulford's intelligence was so limited, but he continued to show that he liked him, as far as one so remote from ordinary mankind could like anybody. They were friends.

Their encounters had not been frequent: accidental meals together after meetings in the Strand, fleeting conversations in corners at literary parties; once a talk at Fulford's

club where Hoffman, an odd apparition in those respectable surroundings, had been brought in to lunch by a casual patron. Fulford could disentangle no impressions of these occasions: merely a general memory of Hoffman's anxious face and unpractical aspirations and of his own benevolent feelings and suppressions. But one picture did stand out vividly clear after four or five years. Hoffman, after a prolonged absence, had been announced at the office one afternoon. He had come in very apologetically with the news that he was to be married next day at the Tottenham Court Road Registry Office. Fulford thrust back a rash impulse to offer to be present. This was not asked; but they were to have a party in the evening in their rooms ("his room" thought Fulford) in Bloomsbury. "I thought you might come in for a little while," said Hoffman. "Emily hopes so too. She knows how good you have been to me. We should be very grateful."

"Why, of course," exclaimed Fulford, "I'm delighted at your news and shall be equally delighted to come to your housewarming." That evening, in a fit of imprudent generosity considering the state of his own bank balance, he had gone the whole hog: it was not a clock, or spoons, or a book, but a really beautiful, useful and expensive

writing desk that he despatched to the address in Bloomsbury. And next night, making excuses for his wife, he turned up at the crush. He was late, and the din, as he climbed the stairs, at its height. The large room, with its far end curtained off, was lit by candles and full of people: sour intellectuals, Buffalo Bills, toreadors and apaches from the less opulent studios of Chelsea, some forlorn-looking damsels and young men whom he guessed to be Mrs. Hoffman's friends, and one or two stray elders like himself, present, no doubt, on the same terms. Hoffman appeared and scrambled away to bring back his wife, a small brown person with a shy frank smile for the dispenser of bounty. Beer was flowing; but there was whisky in a discreet corner for Fulford, and overwhelming thanks for the desk, which more than compensated for the supercilious glances and sullen glowerings of the intelligentsia whose works he had probably refused to praise. After a few minutes with Mrs. Hoffman he liked her very much; she was mothering Alexander already; perhaps she was an elementary school teacher and Alexander had met her in a tea-shop. The whole scene came back to him now, the Hoffmans' brief moment of grandeur; and he sighed as he thought of the bitter struggle they must have had since,

the pinching of that poor gallant little woman, the efforts to keep up a brave face, the disgruntled associates, the hopes for each successive book, always dashed to the ground, vast incoherent books which aimed so high and fell so flat, books which no honest friend of their author could possibly review and which had never had a word of praise except in obscure log-rolling coteries. There was all the recognition Hoffman had obtained. Now and then, silently hoping against hope to convert him, he had sent Fulford some ambitious tale or manifesto printed in one of those may-fly journals, those organs of the Ishmaelites, of which three or four are always struggling for existence in London. Polite ambiguities had been returned in acknowledgment, together with personal inquiries all too obviously warmer. Poor devil! Here was another book which had been palmed off on an unwary publisher: proclaimed on the jacket as a masterpiece comparable with the works of Balzac, Tolstoi and other eminent foreigners. "Well," muttered Fulford to himself as he stared at the bright coals, "I only wish I could do something for the poor chap." There was a knock at the door.

III

There stood Mrs. Hoffman, shabby and pale, her shoulders moist with melting snow. Desperate determination was in her tired eyes as she tripped over to him, hardly noticing his outstretched hand. "Oh, Mr. Fulford," she said, as he almost forced her into a chair, "I hardly dare ask you. I know how busy you are. But Alec" (how odd the name sounded) "is asking for you, and he's so ill, I can't tell you how ill he is."

"But of course I will! What is the matter with him?"

"Didn't you know?" she asked with a touch of pain that gave Fulford a twinge of remorse, "he's been ailing for months and I've had him in bed for weeks. He seems to be wasting away. He's too weak to talk long now. All he can think of now is his new book, 'The Overworld.' It's coming out on Wednesday and he's in a fever about it. He's had so much hard luck, so many disappointments, poor boy. He kept on speaking of you, and I simply had to come."

She noticed the book. "Yes, I have it here," said Fulford hastily. "Shall we go along at once?"

"Yes, it would be so good of you; I got the girl from below to sit with him while I ran out."

In the hall Fulford left a note for his wife. He put on his heavy coat and opened the door. It was blowing hard in the darkness and a fierce sleet was falling. Mrs. Hoffman was apologetic for it. "It isn't far to walk to South Kensington," she said, "and we can get a train from there." On such a night! Fulford felt ashamed when he thought of all the unnecessary cabs he had taken in his life, and of this woman to whom a cab was a thing that simply did not occur. He shouted for one from the rank at the corner. As it raced through the dim wet streets he answered her hurried confidences mechanically; the whole struggle of this poor pair formed itself into a series of pictures that made his heart ache; he worried as to what he could do; he seemed suddenly to be surrounded by tragedies complacently ignored, human duties callously left undone, and here she was thanking him for his "kindness." Men and women, he reflected bitterly, must be content for small mercies if a few civil words were kindness to people battling in solitude with poverty and failure. They turned out of Holborn into one of the degenerate Georgian streets of the quarter. They climbed the gas-lit stair, with its old panelling, long since painted green. Fulford remembered stories of vermin behind

old wood. They reached the landing and softly entered.

The curtains at the far end were gone. A girl sat by the bed, the crochet in her lap bright in the rays of a shaded lamp on a small table. The bed was in shadow and the girl put her finger to her lip. Of the invalid only a little grey hair could be seen between sheet and pillow. Fulford had never been there since the wedding party. It seemed vast and very bare; of course there had been a crowd there then: but his desk had gone as well, and he knew, with a pang, where and why it had gone. A few chairs, a few poor prints on the wall, a small shelf of books: it was all they had, and they had never had much more. A moment showed all this: then, on the silence came a faint voice from the bed, "Is that Emily?" She tip-toed towards him: "Yes, Alec."

"Will Mr. Fulford come?"

"He is here now." At the word the bed clothes stirred, a straining bony elbow appeared, the alarmed woman hurried to arrange the pillows and Hoffman was propped up, with a hand extended over the bed clothes. "Come and sit down, Mr. Fulford," he whispered. The girl from below quietly disappeared from the room, Fulford took the chair and the sick man's hand, and

Mrs. Hoffman, saying "I'll leave you for ten minutes," followed her friend.

Fulford was at once shocked and fascinated by the change in Hoffman. His hair had gone thin and quite grey; his face had a horrible agelessness; his ashen stubbled skin was tightly drawn over the bones; his dark eyes, larger than ever in their deep hollows, had a look of fever. But he was not delirious; he talked, hoarsely and feebly, with more than his old intentness, and, after getting through his thanks as it were in predetermined order, he said, in a voice trembling with decision: "Mr. Fulford, I want to ask you a great favour. My book comes out the day after to-morrow. I know it's the biggest thing I've done. Will you read it? And if you like it say so?"

"Why, of course, my dear fellow," said Fulford, blushing; "as a matter of fact I was just beginning it when your wife came."

Hoffman ignored this and proceeded: "I know it's a great deal to ask you. You're busy. You've always been kind about the others. I knew you couldn't have read them. I quite understood you hadn't time."

Fulford was silent; he had read quite enough of them. "I promise not to ask you again," said Hoffman with an appealing look; and was seized by a fit of spasmodic coughing. Fulford's eyes suffused with tears.

This was a dying man's request. No word of that had been said: but it was evident that Hoffman, his doctor, Emily herself, must know that he was dying, evident also that Mrs. Hoffman knew well enough what he wanted Fulford for. The extent of the emergency must remain unspoken. "When a man is dying it is etiquette to leave the first mention of death to the dying man." The sentence framed itself in Fulford's waiting brain; then he felt bitterly ashamed of the form of it, humiliated at its callous detachment. The coughing stopped; Hoffman was still again in the warm shadows, lying back with his eyes closed. Then he opened them and went on. "My cough," he said. "Will you promise me to look at my book soon? If you like it will you say so? My whole vision of the world is in it. I have had many disappointments. I value your opinion. It would make me so happy if you could see all I mean. My hero goes through every modern philosophy. It all illustrates mine. It is a drama like Faust really, only in prose."

It was another drama that Fulford saw: the lamp-lit room, the dying man in bed, the dream, the utter devotion to art and thought, which made himself feel like some smug grocer or butcher, the courage and anguish of a soul. He struggled for expression and

found it, fixing his eyes in false candour on the searching pathetic eyes before him. "I'm sorry you didn't know it," he said, "I've always admired your books. It's only an accident that I haven't reviewed them. I seldom do novels, you know." In point of fact he had suppressed all his staff's carping notices of Hoffman, except one that had slipped in by accident. The deception, however, was wasted on Hoffman. Hoffman had no time for debates, excuses or explanations; he was thinking only of the immediate crisis, concentrated on wrenching from the world that recognition of his genius and prophetic powers for which he had lived.

"I'm grateful you say so," he said. "If so I know you'll think this the greatest thing I have done. There is a message in it. The plan is grand. There's nothing like it. Emily will tell you so."

"I'll review it myself," said Fulford, taking the plunge, "on the day of publication." He was rewarded by the most beautiful smile he had ever seen illuminating a human face.

Mrs. Hoffman returned; she offered him a cup of cocoa, and accompanied him down the stairs. In the hall she wrung his hand. "Oh, how can I thank you," she said; "I know you are going to do what he wants." Fulford could have hugged her.

IV

He was again in the wet freezing night, looking for the lights of a cab-rank, but scarcely noticing the progress of his steps and unaware of the sleet. "I've done it," he kept on saying to himself, "and I'm glad I've done it." A warm exaltation mingled with the pain left by the contemplation of a spectacle so wretched and so splendid. The problem had crudely presented itself and the solution was obvious and inevitable; it was really no dilemma at all; seen at close quarters it had only one horn. On the one side there were two human beings, innocent and gentle, one of whom, defeated and deprived all through his life, was within a few days of death, the hand of which already overshadowed him. Fulford's whole being swelled with love and pity as he thought, afoot and in the taxi, of those two harmless lives, of Emily's selfless devotion and mothering, of the pure aspirations of her husband, of the little pleasures they would no longer share, of the sufferings silently borne, the inadequate food, the struggle after external decency, the dread of doctor's bills, the shy visits to the pawnshop, the courage. He had it in his power to make the man, and the wife through him, happy, ecstatically happy for a day, before he was beyond reach of

help or hearing, banished, before his time, into the unknown dark. And what was the alternative? To hurt the helpless, to beat down the appealing hands, to turn his back, to inflict the last savage anguish on two hearts which had never harboured anything but charity, to stare at a dying man with frozen eyes, to know for years that a widow would live with the unforgettable memory of a final cruelty. And all why? Simply to satisfy some self-instituted "intellectual conscience," to support some myth called an artistic standard, to minister to his own desire to exercise a fine judgment, to save a few people from buying a book they would not enjoy—and to preserve his own reputation as a critic as flawless as possible! What could all these trifles weigh against those other things; in six months Hoffman would be dead and gone, and book and review would alike be forgotten. Common kindness was more important than this chatter of culture; but here was the opportunity for more than that, the imperative call to a holy duty of comfort in the last emergency of life.

He walked up his steps and turned the key. His note was still there: Dolly and Cameron had not yet returned; an age seemed to have passed but it was not yet half-past ten. Upstairs again and pacing the cosy study, he remembered that he had impul-

sively told the novelist that he would not only himself write at length about the new masterpiece but would do his best to persuade other influential critics to "read the book," the tacit assumption being that to read was to be conquered. "Might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb," he remarked with only a rough approximation to what he meant. "I'll ring up Bowley and Dick Jones in the morning and lunch on it. We'll give the poor devil a really fine show and he can die happy."

He heard steps and returned to his chair. The theatre-going pair broke in, laughing. How had he got on? No, he hadn't done much. There, he might as well have come with them. What was the play like? The common coin was flung about while Cameron took a last drink: somehow he didn't feel like confiding in Cameron, intimate though he was. When Cameron had gone he made Dolly draw up to the fire and told her the whole story; she not only agreed with him but abashed him by admiring him, a process that always made him feel unworthy.

Next day he carried out the programme. It could not be denied that Bowley, who was getting on in years, had seen many people in trouble, and was inclined to think artistic perfection the only thing that gave value to life, was a little difficult to move; but

he made the great concession in the end under pressure of Fulford's graphic pictures of the Hoffmans' life and home. Dick Jones was easier; he was a good judge of literature but did not take it seriously; he had an almost cynical view about the importance and durability of newspaper criticisms, and he cared little about what the world of critical conversation said about him. Neither of them had read the book, and Bowley had never read anything of Hoffman's or even heard of him, though he was quite prepared to believe that any young author deserved the worst that could be said of him. Friendship prevailed; Fulford knew that he might qualify his praise, but he would at least grant the full column that gave the stamp of importance; and Dick Jones could be trusted, in the cause of humanity, to go the whole hog. Neither, moreover, would give the show away: Bowley was too proud, and Dick too indifferent. Relieved and happy at the thought of the sudden glory in that death chamber when the loud trumpets of the three best known newspaper critics could be heard sounding the fame of "The Overworld" in the streets, Fulford returned home and settled down with the grim intention of being hypnotised by the book. He surrendered to it; that is, he rather acceded to the author's intentions than scrutinised his

accomplishment. Even at that it was rather slow going, but there was a certain intrinsic interest in the curious workings of Hoffman's mind, and his pseudo-titanic visions of human existence; and latent always behind the obscure and cloudy speculations, the ineffectively passionate outbursts, the odd and unintentionally obscene passages of "stark realism," there was the image of that unquenchable spirit in its perishing frame waiting for the light to fade in the single bare room. He succeeded thus in imputing to the book all that he knew of Hoffman's fineness and strength; and, when he began writing the pæan he had virtually vowed to publish, he almost forgot his difficulties. The nodosities of Hoffman's English really, for the time, presented themselves as the "natural result of a masterful soul's struggling with a vast intractable mass of material," and his obscurity was next door to a merit in the qualifying word of the phrase "an immense smoky flame." "The audacities of an intellect wrestling with the real," "beautiful clear images against a turbulent, almost chaotic, background," "loveliness that is the flower of pain," "Mr. Hoffman's magnificent endeavour to record and summarise the conflicting aspirations of a tortured age": phrases like these passed fluently from Fulford's pen, and he had so far persuaded himself

and lost himself in the dedicated task that he did not smile when he began a paragraph with, "It cannot be denied that the book has its *longueurs*." Having concluded with a sentence about "the promise of greatness," he folded the review up. He was afraid to look through it again lest he should be tempted to tone it down.

On the morning of publication it appeared, a downright crashing salutation to the genius of Alexander Hoffman. The other two fulfilled their promises and Hoffman, in the world which discusses such things, became famous in a day. There was a rush for "The Overworld" at the libraries. A great many people no doubt persuaded themselves that they liked it, and a great many more that if they didn't it was because it was too deep for them: the agreement of the critics was convincing. Fulford received at once a joyful little letter from Mrs. Hoffman, the invalid being too weak to write: thank Heaven the news had not at once killed him and he could relish his happiness before he died. Fulford meant to call but did not on each of the immediately succeeding days; the sort of neglect that may leave a lifetime of self-reproach behind it. He was then suddenly summoned into the country, and it was a full fortnight after the momentous day of virtuous log-rolling that

he was walking hurriedly along the Strand and encountered a figure that gave him the shock a man gets who meets a ghost in broad daylight. It was Hoffman's double, in a new navy suit; no, it was Hoffman himself who sprang forward with a smile of delight on a face that looked healthier than it had ever looked before. He was a new man with a new kind of confidence. "I began to get better at once," he said. "You saved my life"; and, after a profusion of thanks, he made Fulford's heart sink within him by saying, "Let me come along with you and tell you about my new play." Fulford had to go: he was now pledged for life.

v

So it was. Bowley might retreat and cover his tracks; Dick Jones might forget and could not decently be further dragged in; but Fulford felt bound now not to betray the man he had, as it were, induced to go on living. And every month that passed made it more difficult for him, for it was impossible to prevent people finding out the worthlessness of an author who gave literally nobody either instruction or entertainment. "People," one says, but not the whole world is meant. On the strength of that one resounding chorus Hoffman had got substan-

tial offers from England and America for his next three books, and a large number of periodicals which specialised in the audacious and the incomprehensible put him on the list of their elect. Sneers at him began appearing in certain quarters; to him these seemed the natural fruits of jealousy and the exhilarating rewards of the pioneer; so long as he retained the championship of a man like Fulford he had all the aid he wanted.

But Fulford? He could not explain, and his prestige consequently suffered. Nothing could compensate for his absurd belief in the egregious Hoffman, and the austerer young were merciless to him. "Say what you like," remarked a hard voice which he overheard at a party, "that fellow Fulford *cannot* be any good. Look at the rot he talks about that ass Hoffman's rubbish. He must be either corrupt or a fool."

It was a heavy burden; but how could he turn upon Hoffman and kill him? There are dilemmas of which one horn will completely vanish and then return more spiky and formidable than ever.

IX: THE MAN WHO WROTE FREE VERSE

I

THIS is a very short story. It is hardly a story at all. It might even be described as all moral and no story: a lamentable thing, but the fit is upon us.

It was Sunday afternoon; the sky blue, the sun hot, the shade cool because of a slight breeze. The Manor House, its ancient stones mottled yellow and grey, its arched oaken door ajar, half its mullioned and leaded windows open, slept behind its gently sloping lawn. Lady Muriel was presumably asleep as well; at any rate she had retired to her room after the exhausting chatter of lunch. Sir Herbert and his wife, active delegates from a more energetic world, had gone out for a walk, though all country walks must have been very much alike to them, and they would certainly have nothing to report when they returned except Sir Herbert's hearty and self-evident appetite for tea. The two young men who completed the party had professed weariness and resorted to the shadow of the great cedar, with the Sunday papers and a large collec-

tion of Muriel's latest books. Adrian Roberts, bowed beneath the load of a Foreign Office clerkship, had taken the hammock; Reggie Twyfold, who was burdened only by an acute intelligence and enough to live on, was comfortable in a deck chair with a foot-rest; both were well supported by cushions in red, blue, green and orange silk. Their reading was desultory amid the enchantment of the afternoon. Curving down to their right was a concourse of lilacs, laburnum, and red hawthorn all in bloom. On the left a border, a rockery, the bricks of the walled garden, and southward, making an opening through which the woody pastoral landscape fell and fell into blue distance, two groups of tall elms newly in leaf. At intervals a rook drowsily cawed in one of them and there was a slight flutter of wings; otherwise the birds were silent, and an occasional white butterfly in lazy erratic flight was the only thing in movement.

The church clock struck three; Adrian laid his book on his knees, Reggie languidly dropped his to the ground.

"Muriel's books," said Reggie, "seem even more ridiculous here than they do in town."

"I'm reading Trollope," replied Adrian from his hammock, with the air of one who preferred not to waste his time.

"I confess," replied Reggie defensively, "that I can't help looking at the stuff."

"Some of the bindings are rather engaging."

"No, I mean the insides," insisted Reggie. "I can't help being curious about them, idiotic though they are. You can't realise what rot all these novels are."

"Oh, yes, I can. They are pretentious and psychological, dull and obscene, or cheaply cynical. I do occasionally look at one for conversational purposes with other people, though I dare not admit it to Muriel or she'd bore me to death with her arguments."

"This one I have here isn't even punctuated."

"It makes little difference," said Adrian consolingly; "none of these people can write and few of them seem even to want to."

"But, really, Adrian, I can't quite ignore it all as you do. It's the poetry I was thinking of most. I confess I can't make head or tail of three-quarters of it, but I can't help thinking I may be wrong. Why should they be writing what seems to us cacophonous gibberish? It isn't only Muriel, you know. Lots of people seem to admire it, and it's happening all over Europe and America."

"Not really, my dear. We hear a good deal about it, and the papers we read seem

to think it all ought to be taken seriously. In point of fact these creatures are scarcely read by each other. It's a kind of hideous little underworld; the sort of thing you see when you lift up a large stone and see disgusting insects, beetles and centipedes, scuttling about. They dislike the daylight too. It's all the most awful nonsense. The second-rate have discovered the trick of incomprehensibility in our own time; the trick of bogus audacity has always been known."

"I know, that's what it all seems like to me when I read it. Yet when I'm not reading it I feel that there may be something genuine in all this movement . . ."

"Which?" asked Adrian in an amused voice.

"Oh, the whole of it. The general mix-up. All these isms and experiments. Scientific and social conceptions can't alter without modifying art; music changes and poetry may change; and I conceive new things being said in a new way."

"And so can I," said Adrian. "I really don't mind people saying anything they like if they mean it and are competent to express themselves. I don't insist upon rhymes, and I don't, so long as my ear is pleased, mind people's lines being all of different lengths, and I don't mind impressionism if it produces effects on me, and I'm not a bit afraid

of my sub-conscious. But when half-wits, or no-wits, invite me to applaud their absurd posing and silly illiteracy I see no reason to do so."

"But don't you think," Reggie went on, still generously resolute to put a case against which all his instincts revolted, "that in some way it is all important and symptomatic. Doesn't it seem to you significant that when the Bolsheviks got into power in Russia they made all the Cubists and things official artists?"

Adrian was unmoved. "No," he said, "I'm sure that highly elaborate nonsense means nothing whatever to the proletariat. To their leaders it only meant one more annoyance to the bourgeoisie; though perhaps they naturally felt a kind of affinity for the rape of language and the murder of ideas." His eyes strayed to the far landscape. "The confiscation of the comma," he murmured, as it were for his own benefit. Then he recalled himself and began speaking in more vigorous tones. "Look here, Reggie, you yourself could write all this bosh on your head."

"That's hardly a compliment, is it, if all you say is true?"

"But, quite seriously, you could and you could take them all in. Why not do it, Reggie? Start a career as an advanced poet.

A small piece of shell in your ribs ought not to interfere with that; in fact it might be rather a help. Get them all to take you seriously and then give it away."

"But, Adrian, how could I? They'd all guess. Besides, how would you like to have to fraternise with this dreadful rabble and be despised by all civilised people?" His high voice was querulous.

Adrian turned his head. "That's quite easy," he said. "Take a false name and—yes, an accommodation address, I think they call it. Be invisible! Refuse to meet any one! Be a hopeless invalid! Or disgusting to the sight! Why not a leper? A leper would do beautifully! It really could be quite easily managed. There's a man I get my boots from who would let you use his address. He used to be in the Royal Opera Arcade, but he's just moved now to a place that looks like a private house, in fact there are actually rooms there."

Two substantial figures silently appeared in the opening between the elms, Sir Herbert, hearty even at that distance, and his wife a meet companion. Lady Muriel's voice was heard from an upper window. Adrian waved an arm to them and prepared to rise. "Do think about it, Reggie," he said.

II

Reggie Twyfold sat at his sitting-room window in the Albany. He was on the top floor: dormers on the eastern side: and he looked out on a skyline of slates, chimneystacks, and chimney cowls revolving dizzily in a brisk wind. "You must begin," Adrian had said, "by emptying your mind completely and recording only disconnected impressions. You can work in the rebellion and work out the verbs later." This advice was superfluous; he could have got on well enough without it; but it strengthened him in his purpose to know that Adrian was confident about what he himself had suspected, and he was resolved now to see the imposture through to the bitter—he did not guess how bitter—end. He had, in his time, written competent verse and prose, but he had never sweated such blood trying to write sense as he had now sweated trying to write nonsense. Two and a half hours of scribblings and deletions had left him exhausted: and he looked at the fruits of his labours with an expression of doubt. "It's grotesque," he said, "nobody could print such rubbish. It's inconceivable that there isn't more in it than this." But Adrian was coming to luncheon and he had sworn to have

a first attempt to show him; and, with a groan, he settled down to perfect the experiment. He was still poising his pen over the sheet when Adrian stole in. "Well," he said, "I see you've been at it. Lobster, good! Let's read it while we have lunch."

"I don't think it's really ready," protested Reggie.

"But all the better, Reggie," said Adrian, snatching the paper from him. They sat down at the table. Adrian absently eviscerated half a lobster while he read the sheet, and re-read it. Then "All poetry can best be tested by being read aloud," he said; and suited the action to the word. He read it:

The chimney-cowls
Gyrate
In the
Wind
There is a blot of ink
On
My paper.
I am going to have lunch
Before long
And I am glad there is
A
Lobster.

"My dear," said Adrian, as he finished, "I congratulate you. This is a most ad-

mirable beginning. But there are several faults in it."

"Good Lord, I should think so," said Reggie; "I've never written down such dismal filth in my life."

"Oh, I didn't mean faults in that sense; I meant really what you would ordinarily call merits."

"I'm damned if I can see them," said Reggie.

"But they are there all the same," said Adrian, almost paternally. "For one thing there is almost a flow to it. For another the sentences are quite ordinary. For another you actually express, in one place, a genuine emotion: I mean when you refer to the lobster."

Reggie defended himself. "One must say something," he argued.

"Not necessarily. Please remember that you are lampooning or, rather, imitating. You've read far more of these silly poems than I have. You know all the kinds of them as well as I do. Think of the kinds. Use what you have done as raw material and develop a poem in each kind from it. You must know what I mean. For instance there is the very simple kind which consists of leaving out everything conjunctive, running together a series of objects, and end-

ing with an exclamation. You know as well as I do what I mean, don't you?"

"Oh, of course," said Reggie,

Gyrating cowls.

Ink.

Oh God! A Lobster!

But it would be asinine to think of getting any one to print that."

"Not as asinine as you suppose. You've seen things just like that in books and papers, haven't you? Now put your back into it. I've got an hour to spare and I shall read Matthew Arnold while you show what you can do. You know them all quite well. Don't forget the classical one and don't forget the one which is allowed to rhyme, by way of compensation for its especially polysyllabic obscurity. Eat that pear now, and proceed with your work."

Reggie obeyed. Adrian stretched himself on the sofa while the bard, in fitful bursts, covered several sheets of paper with writing. Now and then he looked up. "You needn't stare at the chimney-pots again," said Adrian on one occasion, "once is quite enough. You can make up all you want to know about them."

Three quarters of an hour elapsed. Reggie rose with a defiant exclamation. "Well,

I've done them," he exclaimed, "and if you really think these things are at all like their originals, all I can say is Lord help somebody."

"You can read them this time," said Adrian. "I'll listen and make necessary suggestions, though I daresay none will be necessary."

Reggie took a deep breath, and began in a voice which showed his determination to beat down his shame. "This," he said, "is one kind that I think you may recognise.

Chimney cowls
Cut
Against sky.
Inky
Excruciating, torturing, abominable
Lobsters
Claws like saws
Goggle-eyes, pins, tentacles
Goggle-eyes at goggle-eyes
Fat men dining at
The Ritz."

"Not a bad beginning," remarked Adrian. "I couldn't tell from your reading, though, whether the lines began with capital letters or small ones."

"Oh, all small ones," Reggie assured him, "and every other line is to be printed upside-

down. 'Ritz' is in very large capitals, and there is a line of alternate notes of exclamation and interrogation marks at the bottom. But I couldn't read those aloud, could I?"

"No, of course not. What about the next?"

"Well, this rhymes; but it is really fearfully obscure:

Apocalyptic chimney cowls
Squeak at the sergeant's velvet hat
Donkeys and other paper fowls
Disgorge decretals at the cat.

The lead archdeacon eats her cheese
Corrupting their connubial bliss
And Mary on her six black knees
Refuses Christopher a kiss.

Autumnal abscesses relent
The twilight of ancestral days
But, smiling at the parsnip's scent,
The Nubian girl undoes her stays!"

"Splendid," said Adrian. "That is much freer. I hope the next one will not rhyme though."

"It does a bit, I'm afraid," said Reggie, "but so very badly that I don't think you could mark it down a point for it. I'm not

sure, though, whether it is quite obscure enough:

Jewelled parakeets arise
Making many a silver noise
Round the checkered chimney cowl
Whilst the old Marchesa's owls
Blinking in the glaring day
Flit like fans from far Cathay
Glittering ink sheds bleak incense
On the poodle's stifled sense
Whilst the crimson-armoured lobster
Wishes that he was an oyster
Slipping like a cockatoo
Through the woods "Tu-whit, Tu-whoo"
Through porticoes and pilasters
Starred with oleanders, asters,
Prim pagodas, jet, wax-fruits
Crinolines of Dresden queens
And indecent salmon-tins
Darting through . . ."

"That's enough," interrupted Adrian.
"That's quite all right. I suppose you get the word 'crystal' in somewhere?"

"Yes, of course," said Reggie, "it comes a little later on with the jade and the unicorns. I found that one so easy that I could hardly stop."

"Put that one aside to be submitted to an editor. What is the next?"

"Classical," said Reggie, "and you are to take it that all the proper names are spelt with good hard 'k's' and 'os's' instead of 'us's.' This is how it goes:

Chimney cowl
Cut
Against sky."

"But this is the same as the first," Adrian broke in. "You've read this one before."

"Only the beginning," said Reggie. "This kind begins like the first but then it gets different. Besides it isn't ever printed upside down; a few italics instead:

Chimney cowl
Cut
Against sky
O Phoibos Albanios
The white limbs
Of the nymphs
On Hymettos
Io Pan, the honey
Acrid
In the nostrils,
Io, the purple
Of the vats of Herakles
On the cliffs
By Akrokeraunia
Hard and bitter

The shells
But the flesh
Ah Zeus!
Ah good!"

"Is that all?" asked Adrian.

"Yes; isn't it enough?"

"Absolutely perfect. But there is one kind missing. Except for that line about fat men eating at the Ritz there was nothing really expressing the spirit of real revolt. You do not do it metaphorically by dissolving words as you have dissolved grammar; you do not do it literally by stating your desire to destroy society, to throw infernal machines at the comfortable, to burn libraries and pictures, to abolish education, to bombard churches and to tip the Almighty off his throne. You do not even wish you were a tiger or a motor-car."

"Well, hang it all, Adrian," said Reggie, kicking the fender a little peevishly, "I have hardly had time, have I? But I do assure you I can do that one even more easily than the others. If you find those satisfactory this will be as well."

"Yes, they're quite perfect."

"Well, I don't know whether to hope you're right or not. Even now I cannot persuade myself that this horrible drivel will take anybody in."

"Well, my dear, you're wrong. I will send you a list of papers to which you may submit them and the address is all right. Now I must be going. The Balkans are waiting for me." He took up his hat, stick, and gloves and went out. His leisurely footstep had sounded four times on the stairs when Reggie rushed after him.

"I say, wait a minute," he called breathlessly, "there's one thing we've forgotten. What is my name to be? I simply must have a convincing one. It would be awful to be found out before the time for disclosure comes; nobody would ever believe I was leg-pulling."

Adrian leant with his back to the banisters, pinched his chin and frowned slightly in thought.

"Ought I to be a woman do you think?" suggested Reggie.

"Wait a minute," said Adrian; and then, "I've got it. These made-up names are never convincing. I've a brilliant idea. Nobody has ever dreamed of using his own name as a pseudonym."

"But, Adrian, it would be absurd to sign myself Reginald Twyfold."

"I wasn't suggesting it. What you must do is to sign yourself Charles Twyfold, or Sidney Twyfold, or Ralph Twyfold. John always looks false. I think Sidney; nobody

would ever call himself by a name like Sidney unless it really was his name."

Reggie was still slightly alarmed. "Twy-fold," he ventured, "is such an uncommon name. I shall be pestered by people asking me if he is a relation."

"Yes. And what better disguise could you have? Frankly admit, when you have to, that he *is* a relation. Try to turn the subject; but if you are pressed confess to a second cousinship. Let it be extracted from you that his branch of the family is a little detrimental. 'I think Sidney lives in Paris. His father had to flee the country and settle in Boulogne, while he himself was not exactly sent down from Oxford but found it convenient to come down after one term.' Good-bye!"

III

A month passed; a month spent by the disreputable Sidney in industrious composition and despatch of manuscripts. Reggie, who couldn't help liking Muriel in spite of her brainless pretentiousness and was always amused by a dive into strange society, was lunching at her house in Upper Berkeley Street. There was a company of twelve in the jazz dining-room: six young men and six middle-aged women. The women, at a

glance, seemed all to have white faces and red hair; the young men had white faces and either no hair or too much; tortoiseshell spectacles were generally worn; voices were pitched high; and any little indecency was welcomed by titters of appreciation. The husbands of the ladies were absent on business or sport; and Art was the principal theme of talk. Reggie managed to keep his end up with the vivacious dames on either side of him. He knew very few of the names of the latest and most devastating Franco-Brazilian painters, and pornography, owing to some strange inhibition, he always shrank from discussing in mixed company. But he met his companions half way; and now and then, when he inadvertently slipped into seriousness, sense, or the disclosure of an acquaintance with the major artists of the past, he delighted them with the surprise of a fresh point of view. The time might come, he reflected, when they might think morality too charming and agree to turn to it for an entirely novel sensation. Suddenly across the confusion of sights and sounds he was aware of Muriel's long neck and vast stupid eyes as it were shouting across a font of painted wooden pomegranates. "Reggie," she cried, "you simply must tell me, *who* is Sidney Twyfold. I simply must know him."

"Why?" asked Reggie, "if you don't mind saying."

"But, dearest Reggie, he writes the most marvellous poetry. We're all simply raving about it. Nobody ever heard of him till two weeks ago. Didn't you see his "Mammon Fox-Trot" in the—I forget which of the papers it was—last week?"

"No," said Reggie, hoping his face was not paling as he thought it was.

"But he must be a relative of yours, isn't he?"

It was the first rehearsal of what was to be Reggie's programme until everybody knew about his vagrant Continental cousin who was so averse from personal publicity. "I have a distant cousin who I think is called Sidney, or else Stanley," he said bravely, "but I've never even seen him. His family live abroad, I believe. I expect it may be he."

"But why don't you run him down? He is wonderful. You simply must find him and bring him in touch with others who are doing the same thing."

Reggie was evasive. He promised to look at the poem, and expressed a conviction that cousin Sidney would be sure to turn up unassisted. The exchange of sentences, dominant above the surrounding scherzo, gave a new direction to the general conversation.

Sidney had been printed in five places in the last three weeks, and most of those present had revelled in his whole product. It was agreed that he had not yet found a definite direction; but as Bertie Griffin said, that was perhaps all the better. Even Cubism and Futurism, it was agreed, had been too narrow. Sidney Twyfold comprehended these and more: he was at once Electrist, Early Victorian, Deliquescent, Sadist, Universalist, Psychoanalyst and Communist; and he could equal each of the most advanced poets on his own ground. Words like reality, metaphysics, complex, impression, release, significance, dull, sentimental and priapic began to swarm in the air like swallows preparing for migration. Reggie could not help being pleased at having caused such a stir. "So much better," he heard a myopic youth say, "than Teddy's 'Convulsions in Blue Flat Minor.'"

Muriel protested: "I thought Teddy's thing delicious."

"No," said the youth, "that sort of thing is rather *vieux jeu*. People like Twyfold have got much farther."

Reggie had a lift in Greta Rogers's car as far as Piccadilly Circus. He could not help, in the comparatively reasonable atmosphere of a *tête-à-tête*, asking her whether she could explain the "Mammon Fox-Trot"

to him, or indeed throw the slightest hint of its meaning to him. "Reggie," she said, "I wish you wouldn't be so obstinate. *All* the amusing young men are doing it, and they *must* be right."

He went down Jermyn Street, turned to the left after looking carefully around him, and sidled into the bootmaker's for his post. He gathered it up, went back to the Albany and locked his door. There were two cheques; there was a manuscript rejected, as he knew and even hoped it would be, by John Fulford to whom he had wickedly sent it; there was a solemn letter of fraternity from a humourless ass who had written all-too-understandable free verse for years and was now about to move with the times; there were three invitations from people he did not know and three more from people he did know, including Muriel herself; there was a request from an emancipated young woman for an assignation; and there was a letter calling him a disgusting scoundrel addressed from one of the Service Clubs and honestly signed "W. H. P. Matthews, Col." Reggie sighed; then he laughed; he would go through with it now, and in two years, when Adrian gave the word, he would blow the whole thing sky-high.

IV

It is impossible here to detail the stages by which Sidney Twyfold attained his ultimate fame. His art developed along various paths, and Reggie managed his career with great acumen. At times he wrote poems consisting entirely of lines like:

i—i—iii—iii—ii—oksz
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But he knew that after a while even his keenest admirers would want rather more pabulum than that. He mixed these cunningly with poems in all the other modes, graduated down to quite lucid, if violently savage, denunciations of the throne, the hearth, and the altar, his views on the need for trampling on women being specially pronounced. He even went farther: at rare intervals he dug out some of the old seriously pretty poems of his regenerate days and sent them to respectable periodicals which had previously rejected them. They were always printed; his disciples rejoiced that their hero could do that sort of traditional thing on his head, and the earnest seekers after truth argued still more earnestly that the fault, as concerned his darker works, must obviously lie with the reader and not with the poet.

As his vogue in all the advanced circles of England and America grew, the chase after his body became hotter. After a brief and risky employment of a district messenger with a cab, he had to leave the bootmaker (who was glad to get rid of him) and move Sidney's quarters to a friend's flat in Paris: it meant delay with the posts, but comparative safety was assured unless the French Post Office could be tampered with for particulars of readdressing. The appearance of his collected volume, "Ourang-Outang," marked an epoch: all the papers had long reviews, enthusiastic, hedging or denunciatory; red political journals began calling him the Poet of the Revolution; and an offer of £5,000 for the MSS. came from a transatlantic bookseller. Reggie was exercised by this; he would have liked the money, but his conscience would not allow him to sell a commodity the value of which he intended presently to destroy. The bookseller, however, was not blind to the advertising value of his mere offer; he blazoned it, and the refusal, abroad, and even the most conventional began to think that there must be a finely austere artist in this Twyfold who not merely declined all personal publicity but had stated that he did not approve of the factitious making of money by the sale of manuscripts.

The two years were nearly up, and Adrian and he were continually dinning on the ways and means by which the imposture should be revealed to the world. The leader of revolt would suddenly throw off his dark cloak and step forward as the Laughing King of the Imbeciles. How certain it all seemed! Yet life is but one vast chain of sleeping volcanoes, and this plan also went up in an unheralded eruption.

Reggie had gone to bed early that night when the great British Bolshevik Revolution broke out. He did not see St. Paul's and Westminster consumed by flames; he was not present when the Queen Victoria Memorial, that idol and symbol of a hated aristocracy, was pulled down by ropes; he was still asleep in the most secluded thoroughfare in London, when the morning boat for Russia left crowded with refugees bound for the safest and most prosperous monarchist country remaining. The first, in fact, that he knew of the change, was the appearance in his bedroom of three dirty and hirsute men with pistols, who announced themselves as the heads of the British Soviet, Abramovitch, Macalister and Evans. Reggie, dazed, took some time to pull himself together; but when he was at last awake he thought they had gone mad, for they clicked to the salute and said, in unison, "The Dawn, Comrade."

"What?" asked the astonished Reggie.

"We greet the Poet of the Revolution," chimed the three harsh voices.

"But," exclaimed Reggie, with a sudden intuition, "you've got the wrong man. You must have looked me up in the telephone book and got the wrong name. The poet is Sidney Twyfold; I'm Reggie; he's my cousin."

Abramovitch spoke. "Zere is," he said, "no further neet for dezeption, gomrade. Ve haf spied on you and your letters for a year. You haf done your vork; you must now haf ze revard." They led him away.

As they went down the stairs Reggie heard the uproar of a vast multitude cheering in those cloisters where no multitude had ever been before. Above the din shrill voices were calling his own name. He began to guess.

V

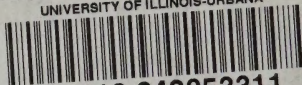
And so it was. Reggie, after that intoxicating pageant in Hyde Park where he was unveiled to a people which had thrown off its chains, became the official Laureate of the British Republic. He was allowed one room in his old quarters at the Albany, and was guarded night and day; for, after all, though his sentiments had hitherto been un-

exceptionable, the bourgeois blood might out. It was a tedious job being the Tyrtæus of the Reds; but so long as he could not be understood they were quite satisfied with him. All his friends, including Adrian and Muriel, were in St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) earning their living by teaching dancing and English, and selling work which they described as English Peasant Embroidery. He was no worse off than they; and he had a salary of a million paper pounds a day as well as a barrel of beer a year. He knew that Adrian would not give him away for fear of getting him shot; still, it mattered little, for, had the truth about Reggie been told, his masters would probably have treated it as one more infamous capitalist lie.

He died in the end, poor fellow, of boredom and intellectual starvation. His funeral was attended by half the army and millions of the proletariat. He was buried in the National Pantheon in Villiers Street, Strand.

THE END

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